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Whose Immortal Picture Stories?: *Amar Chitra Katha* and the Construction of Indian Identities

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Whose Immortal Picture Stories?: *Amar Chitra Katha* and the Construction of Indian Identities

by

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Whose Immortal Picture Stories?: *Amar Chitra Katha* and the Construction of Indian Identities

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Since it was first founded by Anant Pai in 1967, the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series has dominated the flourishing comic book market in India, selling over 440 titles and more than 86 million issues. *Amar Chitra Katha* means "immortal picture stories," and as the name suggests, these comics feature India's own immortal heroes – its mythological gods and historical leaders – as their protagonists. The first comics in the series were mythological in nature, recasting classical Sanskrit narratives of Hindu deities like Krishna, Ram, and Hanuman in the comic book format. Over the years, the series has expanded to include issues on a variety of other subjects: celebrated Hindu kings such as Shivaji and Rana Pratap; medieval bhakti poets like Tulsidas; modern Hindu sages like Swami Vivekananda; animal fables from the *Pañcatantra*; and colonial-era freedom fighters including Subhas Chandra Bose and Lokamanya Tilak. Through content analysis alone, it is easy to conclude that the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series conveys a hegemonic conception of "Indianness" to its readers, one that entails the marginalization of Muslims and other religious and cultural "outsiders" from the national past, the

recasting of women in so-called "traditional" roles, and the privileging of middle-class Hindu culture. Yet the question "Whose immortal picture stories?" – whose stories do these comic books tell? – is not really this easy to answer. Hegemonic forms are always in flux: dominant ideologies do not just exist passively, but are instead actively created and recreated amidst ongoing debate. Comic books, as a form of public culture that reaches into the everyday lives of millions of middle-class Indian children, are a crucial site for ongoing debate about what it means to be Indian. In this study I examine not only how such hegemonic discourses of religion, gender, and nation have been created over time, but also the ways in which they are supported or contested in both the production and consumption of this genre of popular visual culture.

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Introduction: Whose Immortal Picture Stories?

In August of 2000, Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi, India's Union Human Resource Development Minister, presided over the official release of the new *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book titled *Bhagawat: The Krishna Avatar* (not numbered, 2000). While holding aloft this 272-page "bumper issue" volume about the life and deeds of the Hindu deity Krishna, Dr. Joshi endorsed this comic book in particular before the crowd and lauded the educational value of the entire comic book series more generally, stating that the "future generation should know [our] country's rich heritage and culture and our education system should encourage ways and means to achieve this."[1] This release party occurred shortly after the 1999 general elections, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing Hindu nationalist group, was re-elected with Atal Behari Vajpayee as the Prime Minister. In 2000, Joshi, Vajpayee, and other BJP officials were working to fulfill their campaign pledge to "Indianize, nationalize, and spiritualize" the school curriculum. As they commissioned Hindu nationalist historians to rewrite the NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) history textbooks, a bitter controversy erupted between right-wing politicians and left-leaning historians. While I conducted my field research in India in 2001-2, the nation remained embroiled in heated disputes over competing visions of the national past.[2] For Dr. Joshi, however, these debates were

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[1] "Future Generation Should Know Country's Heritage and Culture," *The Free Press Journal* (Mumbai: Aug. 24, 2000), 3.

[2] On the history textbook controversy, see *Saffronised Substandard: A Critique of the New NCERT Textbooks – Articles, Editorials, Reports* (New Delhi: Sahmat, 2002). A few of the many news articles from 2001-2 that I clipped include: Sakina Yusuf Khan and Sujata Dutta Sachdeva, "The Fine Print: Has the 'Talibanisation' of Education Begun?" *The Times of India* (Mumbai: Sunday, Nov. 25, 2001), 1 and 7; "Joshi Agrees to Put School Textbooks to 'Holy Test'," *The Times of India* (Mumbai: Sunday, Dec. 9, 2001), 1; Shabnam Minwalla, "Students Won't Accept Pathetic Attempts at Saffronisation," *The Times of India* (Mumbai: Sunday, Dec. 30, 2001), 3; and Irfan Habib, "It's Going to be More Mythology than History" (guest column), *The Times of India* (New Delhi: Feb. 3, 2002), 12.

moot: he had already decided that these mythological and historical comic books provided exactly the kind of narrative of "Indianness" that he would have educators and parents instill in the youth of India. This incident demonstrates that these comic books are more than "throw-away culture"; they are an important window into the construction of identity in modern India.

Since it was first founded by Anant Pai in 1967, the *Amar Chitra Katha* (or *ACK*) comic book series has dominated the flourishing comic book market in India, selling over 440 titles and more than 86 million issues. *Amar Chitra Katha* means "immortal picture stories," and as the name suggests, these comics feature India's own immortal heroes – its mythological gods and historical leaders – as their protagonists. The first comics in the series were mythological in nature, recasting classical Sanskrit narratives of Hindu deities like Krishna, Ram, and Hanuman in the comic book format. Over the years, the series has expanded to include issues on a variety of other subjects: celebrated Hindu kings such as Shivaji and Rana Pratap; medieval bhakti poets like Ramdas and Tulsidas; modern Hindu sages like Swami Vivekananda; animal fables from the *Pañcatantra*; and colonial-era freedom fighters including Subhas Chandra Bose and Lokamanya Tilak.[3]

With the growth of Hindu nationalist movements during the past several decades, the construction of a hegemonic Indian identity has been escalating. This concept of "Indianness" entails the marginalization of Muslims and other religious and cultural "outsiders" from the national past, the recasting of women in so-called "traditional" roles, and the privileging of middle-class Hindu culture. Through a simple title analysis alone, it is easy to conclude that the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series conveys this conception of Indian identity to its readers. Yet the question "Whose immortal picture stories?" – whose stories do these comic books tell? – is not really this easy to answer.

[3] A chronological list of *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book titles can be found in the Appendix.

Hegemonic forms are always in flux: dominant ideologies do not just exist passively, but are instead actively created and recreated amidst ongoing debate. Comic books, as a form of public culture that reaches into the everyday lives of millions of middle-class Indian children, are a crucial site for ongoing debate about what it means to be Indian. In this study I examine not only how such hegemonic discourses of religion, gender, and nation have been created over time, but also the ways in which they are supported or contested in both the production and consumption of this genre of popular visual culture.

The study of media, religion, and culture has only recently emerged as a burgeoning field of inquiry, as scholars begin to recognize the impact that the various media technologies that we encounter in our daily lives can have on religious traditions, symbols, narratives, beliefs, and practices. This field of inquiry has been late blooming for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, scholars in the field of media studies were initially reluctant to consider religion as a legitimate focus of reflection. Many influential Western social theorists, including Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Jurgen Habermas, have posited a separation between religious and secular realms, whereby the public, secular, "rational" sphere – the sphere of the media – has been privileged over and viewed as distinct from the private, religious, "non-rational" sphere.[4] Only recently have scholars begun to deconstruct this binary and recognize that "the media are an organic site of contemporary religious practice."[5] This recognition dawned at the end of the twentieth century as scholars witnessed the declining importance of institutionalized religion in the daily lives of citizens of Western industrial countries and the simultaneous

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[4] See Stewart M. Hoover and Shalini S. Venturelli, "The Category of the Religious: The Blindspot of Contemporary Media Theory?" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1996), 251-265.

[5] Stewart M. Hoover and Shalini S. Venturelli, "The Category of the Religious," ibid., 258. Also see Lynn Clark, "The Protestantization of Research on Media and Religion" in Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, eds., *Practicing Religion in the Age of Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 7-34.

rise of mediated religious phenomena, such as the American televangelism craze of the 1970s-80s.[6]

Scholars of religion, on the other hand, have long focused their studies on sacred texts. Casting their inquiries backwards in time to seek out authoritative texts, these scholars have long excluded other expressions of religious belief and activity. William Graham has recently pointed out the limitations and biases of this focus upon the written word in his study of oral scripture, and other scholars of religion have begun to ask what would happen to our understanding of religion if we started "on the ground" with practice and material culture, rather than with texts.[7] Such inquiries have cleared the way for new questions about religious beliefs and practices that extend beyond classical texts and institutional religious traditions, including the place of popular culture as a locus for such beliefs and practices.[8]

Recent forays into the field of media, religion, and culture include studies of film and religion, media ritual, the roles that media play in religious conflict, media as vehicles for the expression of popular piety, and media ethics.[9] Yet much work remains

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[6] Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, "Introduction" to Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997), 5. On televangelism, see the article by Bobby C. Alexander in the same volume, pages 194-208. Scholars of gender and cultural studies have also provided important discussions of the limitations of such public/private theories. See, for instance, Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) and Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[7] William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); on religions in practice, two good sources are John R. Bowen, *Religions in Practice: An Approach to the Anthropology of Religion* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2001) and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Asian Religions in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); on material culture and religion in the South Asian context, see Gregory Schopen, "Burial '*Ad Sanctos*' and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism," *Religion* 17 (1987), 193-225 and John Cort, "Art, Religion, and Material Culture: Some Reflections on Method," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64.3 (1996), 613-632.

[8] See, for instance, Catherine L. Albanese, "Religion and Popular Culture: An Introductory Essay," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 59, no. 4 (fall 1996), 733-742. Also worth reading are the other essays in this special volume on religion and popular culture.

[9] For a great bibliographic discussion of studies on media, religion, and culture, see Lynn Schofield Clark and Stewart M. Hoover, "At the Intersection of Media, Culture, and Religion: A Bibliographic Essay" in

to be done, particularly in considering the intersection of media and religion in non-Western cultures. The primary research focus has been the Judeo-Christian tradition, although in the past several years a number of studies of Islam and the media have been released.[10] Overall, however, analyses of media and non-Abrahamic religions and cultures are few and far between. Yet studying media and religion in non-Western contexts can often raise productive new questions about the relationship between media and religion. For instance, with respect to the South Asian context in particular, one cannot assume that the rise of mediated religious phenomena has occurred in tandem with a declining emphasis on institutionalized religion. Instead, new media technologies have often worked to make institutionalized religious symbols, beliefs, and practices more mobile. In their edited collection *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley demonstrate how god posters, comic books, videocassettes, audio recordings, televised serials, and films have transported religious messages to larger audiences and across great distances. For instance, John Little's article in this collection discusses the use of videotaped sermons by the Bombay-based Swadhyaya movement to distribute religious instruction to its followers in Ahmedabad, Nairobi, Bahrain, London, and Chicago.[11] Babb and Wadley also demonstrate how

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Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, op. cit., 15-36. In addition to the other essays in this collection, other excellent edited collections featuring a variety of approaches to the study of media, religion, and culture include: Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, eds., *Practicing Religion in the Age of Media*, op. cit.; and Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage, eds., *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion, and Culture* (New York: T&T Clark, 2003).

[10] In addition to those sources already noted, other recent studies of media and religion in the Western context include: (on Christianity) Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, eds., *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); and (on Islam) Kai Hafez, *Islam and the West in the Mass Media: Fragmented Images in a Globalizing World* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2000).

[11] John T. Little, "Video Vacana: Swadhyaya and Sacred Tapes" in Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 254-283.

media technologies in South Asia have enhanced not only the spatial mobility of religious symbols and beliefs, but the social mobility as well:

> "new media have increased the capacity of religious symbols to penetrate social barriers and to bypass social bottlenecks that have inhibited their propagation in the past. Generally speaking, this has probably been the most important effect of new communications technologies on South Asian religion."[12]

In his article on god posters (also known as calendar art), H. Daniel Smith discusses how these posters provide lower-caste devotees, who were often barred from entering temples on the grounds of their social status, with a new means of accessing deities.[13] Philip Lutgendorf's article in this same collection discusses the televised "Ramayana" serial (directed by Ramanand Sagar) that aired weekly on India's government-run television network, Doordarshan, from January 25, 1987 to July 31, 1988, and demonstrates how this incredibly popular serial about the life of the Hindu god Ram brought this epic narrative to a whole new generation of Hindus and to many non-Hindus as well. Indeed, Lutgendorf reports that this televised epic was greeted with unprecedented acts of mass devotion, as televisions were placed in public areas and then "sanctified with cow dung and Ganges water [and] worshipped with flowers and incense" before being watched by crowds of neighborhood residents.[14]

Such public displays of devotion in the South Asian context demonstrate the need to rethink our Western-derived understandings of the place of religion in the public sphere, the importance of non-textual expressions of religion, and the relationship between popular media and institutional religious traditions. In the field of South Asian studies, compelling arguments have been made in recent years that analyses of popular

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[12] Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley, "Introduction" to *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ibid., 3-4.

[13] H. Daniel Smith, "Impact of 'God Posters' on Hindus and Their Devotional Traditions," in Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ibid., 24-50.

[14] Philip Lutgendorf, "All in the (Raghu) Family: A Video Epic in Cultural Context," in Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ibid., 224.

visual culture and other public media are crucial to our understanding of modern South Asia. Sandria Freitag has expressed this sentiment well:

> Powerfully evocative visions of the nation dominated the anti-imperial discourse of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British India. In the forms of posters, photographs, statuary, and, especially, live enactments in public spaces, South Asians explored and created a new visual vocabulary to express their alternative understandings of the world they inhabited. Yet historians have been astonishingly slow to theorize beyond the role of print in their efforts to interpret this complex past. They have treated the immensely rich visual primary-source materials simply as accompanying illustration for a narrative drawn solely from textual evidence.[15]

New studies of Indian cinema and television, in particular, demonstrate the importance of these visual media as forums wherein Indians construct a national past and debate what it means to be Indian today.[16] Yet the category of the religious has been largely neglected in these studies. With the exception of Babb and Wadley's edited collection, few scholars have asked how popular media may transform religious beliefs, symbols, and practices; or considered the history that these media have had in the consolidation of multiple Hindu traditions into one pan-Indian religion; or theorized the impact of popular media upon ongoing debates about religious, gendered, and national identities.[17]

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[15] Sandria B. Freitag, "Visions of the Nation: Theorizing the Nexus Between Creation, Consumption, and Participation in the Public Sphere," in Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, eds., *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 35. Also see Christopher Pinney, "Introduction: Public, Popular, and Other Cultures," in R. Dwyer and C. Pinney, eds., *Pleasure and the Nation*, ibid., 1-34; and Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, "Introduction" to Carol Breckenridge, ed., *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 1-20.

[16] For example, Kirk Johnson, *Television and Social Change in Rural India* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003); Ravi Vasudevan, ed., *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

[17] A few noteworthy exceptions are the collection of essays in the special issue of *Polygraph: An International Journal of Culture and Politics* on "World Religions and Media Culture" (no. 12, 2000); Vasudha Dalmia's study of the popular writings of playwright and journalist Bharatendu Harishchandra, which made a substantial contribution to consolidating Hinduism into a pan-Indian religion: *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harischandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham: Duke University

Furthermore, in spite of the recent spate of studies of South Asian media and culture, the field is dominated by research on the film industry. Yet as Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge have argued, the contours of the media boom in South Asia are barely understood, and studies of various media are necessary as "each of these media technologies has distinctive capabilities and functions, and each interacts in a different way with older modes of organizing and disseminating information."[18] To date, only a handful of scholars have studied Indian comic books, and that only in brief. Two articles that appeared in the aforementioned collection, *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, include an essay by Frances Pritchett that provides a valuable textual and production-oriented overview of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series, and an essay by John Stratton Hawley that discusses the portrayal of the bhakti poet-saints in this comic book series.[19] Other discussions of these comic books have been published by Asian comics scholar John Lent, who provides a very brief overview of the historical methods employed in the production process, and Nandini Chandra's discussion of the marketing process.[20]

Increasingly, comics are receiving a serious place of study in the West. Perhaps it is because comic books were initially dismissed by many parents and educators as "crude, unimaginative, banal, vulgar, ultimately corrupting" products, and were even scrutinized and censored by the American government under the Comics Code, that

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Press, 1999); and Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[18] Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, "Introduction" to *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, op. cit., 7.

[19] Frances Pritchett, "The World of *Amar Chitra Katha*" and John Stratton Hawley, "The Saints Subdued: Domestic Virtue and National Integration in *Amar Chitra Katha*." Both articles are well worth reading for those interested in learning more about this comic book series. They can be found in Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, op. cit., pages 76-106 and 107-134 respectively.

[20] John A. Lent, "India's *Amar Chitra Katha*: 'Fictionalized' History or the Real Story?" *International Journal of Comic Art* (Spring 2004), 56-76; Nandini Chandra, "Market Life of Amar Chitra Katha," *Seminar*, no. 453 (May 1997), 25-30.

scholars have been slow to recognize comics as a researchable topic.[21] Lagging several decades behind the study of the film industry, scholars of popular culture first began to study comics in the 1970s, usually from an ideological or comparative perspective.[22] But only in the past couple of decades has the academic study of comics truly come into its own, with new studies of the art, aesthetics, history, philosophy, marketing, and reception of comics.[23] And within the past decade, comics from around the world have just begun to receive academic attention as the field of cultural studies continues to grow.[24]

This project is an attempt to begin to address these gaps in the fields of religious, media, and cultural studies. I perceive *Amar Chitra Katha* comics as "public culture" in

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[21] M. Thomas Inge, "Introduction" to the "In-Depth Section: Comics as Culture" in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 12, no. 4 (Spring 1979), 630-754. See also Paul Buhle, "The New Scholarship of Comics," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 16, 2003), B7-B9. On the Comics Code Authority see John A. Lent, ed., *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999); Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); and Marjorie Heins, *Not in Front of the Children: "Indecency," Censorship, and the Innocence of Youth* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 37-59.

[22] A groundbreaking work on comics in the 1970s was Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, trans. by David Kunzle (New York: International General, 1975). The 1970s also saw the publication of several important studies of the ideology of comics by French scholars, including Philippe Souchet et al., *Le Message Politique et Social de la Bande Dessinee* (Toulouse: Privat, 1975). On the comparative approach, see Francis Lacassin, "The Comic Strip and Film Language," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1972), 11-23; also Earle J. Coleman, "The Funnies, the Movies, and Aesthetics," *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1985), 89-100.

[23] On the various approaches to the study of comics, see Matthew Lombard, John A. Lent, Linda Greenwood, and Asli Tunc, "A Framework for Studying Comic Art," *International Journal of Comic Art* (Spring/Summer 1999), 17-32. A few recent and excellent studies of comics include: David Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Matthew McAllister, Edward Sewell Jr., and Ian Gordon, eds., *Comics and Ideology* (New York: P. Lang, 2001); and Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons, eds., *The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

[24] Among the recent studies of comics and culture on a global scale, see H. von Alphons Silbermann and H.D. Dyroff, eds., *Comics and Visual Culture: Research Studies from Ten Countries* (New York: K.G. Saur, 1986); Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); John A. Lent, ed., *Illustrating Asia: Comics, Humor Magazines, and Picture Books* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001); Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000); and Anne Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge's sense of the term as describing a "zone" of cultural debate:

> a set of arenas that have emerged in a variety of historical conditions and that articulate the space between domestic life and the projects of the nation-state – where different social groups (classes, ethnic groups, genders) constitute their identities by their experience of mass-mediated forms in relation to the practices of everyday life.[25]

In the following chapters, I will explore the specific historical conditions from which these comic books emerged and the variety of Indian identities – religious as well as class, caste, regional, and gendered identities – that are debated and constituted in and through the production and consumption of this popular medium. I will also explore the limits of these debates, keeping in mind Christopher Pinney's warning that in public culture there is also "ample evidence of erasure, of the elevation of particular dominant norms, alongside an ongoing debate about the nature of personal, community, and national identity."[26] With this book-length study, I hope to provide a good base for further consideration of the relationship between media, religion, and culture in South Asia, allowing the uniqueness of Indian comic books as a medium for identity formation to be explored so that they may then be located in the wider, intertextual context of public culture, both in India and transnationally.

RESEARCH METHODS AND ISSUES

This dissertation is the result of one year of ethnographic research with the producers, retailers, and consumers of *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books, and several more years of research into the earlier textual and visual narratives of the comic books'

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[25] Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, "Introduction" to *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, op. cit., 4-5. Also see Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, "Why Public Culture?" *Public Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1988), 5-10.

[26] Christopher Pinney, "Introduction: Public, Popular, and Other Cultures," in R. Dwyer and C. Pinney, eds., *Pleasure and the Nation*, op. cit., 9.

mythological and historical "heroes." In 2001 to 2002, I spent a year in the field at the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book studio. The office of India Book House, the publishing company of both the *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Tinkle* comic book series[27], is located on the fifth floor of an office building in Mumbai (Bombay), near a famous Hindu temple, Mahalakshmi Mandir, and a famous Muslim mosque, Hajji Ali Masjid. Navigating by these landmarks, I first arrived at the comic book studio in the fall of 2001, several weeks later than expected due to post-9/11 airline delays. Immediately upon my arrival, I was shown to an empty desk – one that had been cleared three weeks previously in anticipation of my lengthy visit. As I smiled and surveyed the office, all eyes were upon me. I learned from Savio Mascarenes, a talented artist who gave me my first tour of the studio and personally introduced me to the publisher of the comics, Anant Pai, that although Mr. Pai was used to receiving requests for interviews from journalists, both Indian and foreign, and even a few foreign scholars, no one had ever asked him if they could spend a year at the studio studying Indian comic books. Savio, Mr. Pai, and the entire staff at the studio were curious about what I would do with myself during this time, since I really didn't "have a job" there.[28]

Briefly, I'd like to explain what my "job" was during 2001-2 as I conducted my fieldwork at the comic book studio and elsewhere. There were three primary components to my research: analyses of the content, production, and consumption of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series. Prior to my arrival at the comic book studio, I had already collected over two hundred issues from this series through a previous visit to India and internet purchases, but was unable to examine approximately two hundred original issues

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[27] *Tinkle* is a fiction-based comic book series that was founded by Anant Pai in 1980 for a young (8 and under), pre-*Amar Chitra Katha* audience. It is discussed further in Chapter 1.

[28] Savio Mascarenes, in conversation with the author in Mumbai on October 8, 2001. Comic book producers' names, when cited, are used with their generous permission; the names of comic book consumers, retailers, and some producers are protected for their privacy.

that had never been reprinted. One part of my field research, therefore, consisted in careful textual and visual analyses of these remaining comic books. I conducted this research at the library in the comic book studio, where the librarian, Anthony, allowed me to check out a few original issues at a time to read and take notes over while at my desk. There were several key issues that I explored in this phase of my research: the issue of narrative authenticity versus poetic license; the relationship between history and mythology; and text-image relations.

Throughout South Asian history there is a strong tradition of narrative liberalism. The many versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic are perhaps the best-known example of this tradition. In addition to Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Sanskrit version that scholars believe to be the earliest narrative of the god Ram, there are hundreds of other versions of this story in South Asia and beyond – from early Buddhist versions that redefine Ram as the Buddha himself in a previous life to anti-colonial Bengali versions that turn Ram into the villain and the antagonist Ravana into the hero; from women's oral songs about the hardships that Ram's wife Sita must endure to Hindu nationalist versions that transform the Hindu god-king Ram into a national hero; from epic scenes carved on classical temple walls and premodern Ram Lila plays to modern televised, filmed, and comic book renditions of the story.[29] When the televised "Ramayana" serial aired on the state-run network, Romila Thapar feared that the overwhelming popularity of this new rendition of the narrative could overshadow the pluralistic *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. This was particularly troubling, she argued, because the state was presenting a version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as part of India's "national culture" that really represented only "the middle class and other

[29] On the diversity of the *Ramayana* tradition, the best sources are Paula Richman, ed., *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) and Paula Richman, ed., *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

aspirants to the same status."[30] Paula Richman and other scholars have argued that, on the contrary, they "take the popularity of the televised *Rāmāyaṇa* not as heralding the demise of other tellings but as affirming the creation of yet another rendition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the latest product of an ongoing process of telling and retelling the story of Rama."[31] Other examples of narrative liberalism abound in South Asia, as can be found in the qissa, dastan, masnavi, and ghazal genres of prose and poetry. Frances Pritchett, for instance, discusses the "textual fluidity" of the qissa genre of popular Hindi and Urdu folktales, noting that some stories of the same name are published in lengthy and short editions, in verse and in prose, and in versions that differ so substantially that they may share little more than a title.[32] This narrative liberalism, which discounts the concept of an *Ur*-text, allows for great freedom in the emplotment of mythological and historical figures.[33] Indeed, it highlights the fact that the concept of "originality" can have different meanings in different places. In the South Asian context, originality often involves building upon known traditions in novel ways, rather than the creation of entirely new narratives, characters, or concepts.[34]

While conducting my content analysis of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series, I investigated how these comics draw upon earlier textual and visual narrative traditions to emplot their mythological and historical heroes, and what novelties are

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[30] Romila Thapar, "The *Ramayana* Syndrome," *Seminar*, no. 353 (January 1989), 74.
[31] Paula Richman, "Introduction: The Diversity of the *Ramayana* Tradition" in Paula Richman, ed., *Many Ramayanas*, op. cit., 5.
[32] Frances W. Pritchett, *Marvelous Encounters: Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1985); see especially the second chapter, "Qissa and Mass Printing."
[33] For instance, see Sunil Sharma, "Amir Khusraw and the Genre of Historical Narratives in Verse," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 22, nos. 1 & 2 (2002), 112-118.
[34] On varying cultural conceptions of originality, see Richard Shiff, "Originality" in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History* (2nd edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 145-159. For specific discussions of originality in non-Western contexts, see Frances W. Pritchett's discussion of "maẓmūn āfirīnī" and "ma'nī āfirīnī" in ghazal poetry in her *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 91-122; and Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Beauty in Arabic Culture* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1999), especially pages 100-101.

introduced into these narrative traditions through this new medium. One could choose to view these comic tales as one more addition to an ongoing process of narrative liberalism and textual fluidity, and indeed they are. But, like Romila Thapar, I believe we must also examine how such popular products can contribute to the increasingly hegemonic narrative of India's national culture that is being advanced by middle-class Hindus and, in many cases, the state. Although these comic books are not state-sponsored as the televised "Ramayana" serial was, the state has had an influential – if indirect – relationship with these comics, as can be evidenced by Dr. Joshi's endorsement of the series, or by the release of a special *Valmiki's Ramayana* "bumper issue" (no. 10,001) in 1992, in the midst of the BJP's highly-politicized campaign to build a Ram temple in Ayodhya that ultimately resulted in the destruction of a Muslim mosque and an electoral victory for the BJP.[35]

In this phase of my research I also explored the relationship between history and mythology. Although the comic books are grouped into mythological and historical categories, I quickly realized that the divide between history and mythology is not as strict as it first appears. The introduction to the *Ganga* (no. 88, 1975) issue, for instance, states, "Mythology is not all fact, we know, but yet, in its vast poetic exaggerations, one can always trace an outline of the truth."[36] The mythology-history binary is broken down visually as well. The final panels of *Shivaji*, the first historical comic book (no. 23, 1971), and one of the earliest mythological comic books, *Rama* (no. 15, 1970), are both coronation scenes: in the former, the seventeenth-century Maratha hero is crowned king, with his mother and son standing at his side; in the latter, the mythological hero Ram is

[35] The relationship between this comic book series and the state is discussed further in Chapter 1. On the temple-mosque controversy, see Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), especially pp. 1-24.

[36] *Ganga*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 88 (Bombay: India Book House, 1975), inside front cover.

crowned king, with his wife at his side. In these panels, both heroes are enthroned at the head of the stairs, before a court full of prostrating citizens and priests. Such parallels suggest that, in preparing the visual templates and storyboards for these comics, mythology and history were often considered to be complementary rather than oppositional – together, they tell the "whole truth" of the Indian past.

In my content analysis I also explored text-image relations, noting when imagery supports or subverts the text. Although many in the comic book industry feel that the ideal text-image relationship is an interdependent one in which words and images work hand-in-hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone, this ideal relationship does not always exist.[37] For instance, many issues such as *Rabindranath Tagore* (no. 136, 1977) and *Bhagat Singh* (no. 234, 1981) juxtapose Gandhi's call for non-violent protests of the colonial regime with the Jallianwala Bagh massacre – the massacre that occurred in 1919 when the British Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer ordered his riflemen to fire upon the large crowd of Indians assembled at the Jallianwala Bagh area in Amritsar. In the midst of recounting the accomplishments of the famous poet Rabindranath Tagore, the comic book of the same name features a panel depicting this infamous massacre. Here the lengthy text makes a chain of causal connection between British oppression, Gandhi's call for a *hartal* (boycott) of the British, and the massacre. By associating the massacre with Gandhi – a figure who could not be visibly represented in the scene because he was not in Amritsar when the massacre occurred – the text provides the image with a meaning it would not have had otherwise, calling into question Gandhi's non-violent approach to civil disobedience.

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[37] On this ideal relationship, see Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), especially pages 138-161. Also see Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion of text-image relations in this comic book series.

The second component of my field research was an analysis of the production process, based on daily observation at the comic book studio and interviews I conducted with the in-studio and freelance authors, artists, and editors of *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Tinkle* comic books. My desk at the studio was positioned at the end of a row of a half dozen artists' desks. These in-studio artists were all men, with the lone exception of the female letterer, and came from a variety of Hindu and Christian middle-class backgrounds: upper middle-class English-speaking, art-school educated artists who pursued their own art on the side; middle-class English-, Hindi-, and Marathi-speaking artists who received their training at advertising agencies but had a passion for comics; and lower middle-class Hindi- and Marathi-speaking artists from artisan lineages without any institutional training. From my vantage point I would spend the mornings watching these artists create pencil dummies and ink panels.[38] During this process, I was able to listen to and take part in their creative conversations (usually in Hindi, with many English terms and phrases thrown in), learning about the production process from their end and the range of creative freedom exercised by the artists. Frequently, an artist would show me the visual instructions and references he had received from the editors for a new story, and would demonstrate how he went about fulfilling those instructions. On other occasions, however, the artists would decide to exert creative control, as when Savio suggested that the editors should "let artists be artists and writers be writers" after he was requested to revise a page he had inked up featuring Goa[39]; or when another artist politely declined to rework his Santa Claus for a special multi-religious holiday issue of *Tinkle* after the editors pointed out that Santa did not look very merry or jolly, but appeared to

[38] The production process is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.
[39] Savio Mascarenes, interviewed by the author in Mumbai on October 11, 2001.

be scowling.[40] Such occasions were quite interesting from my standpoint, as they often pointed to ways in which an individual artist's background and identity could impact the production process. For instance, the former artist is a Catholic from Goa and is therefore very particular about the presentation of this city. The latter artist, on the other hand, is an active member of the right-wing Hindu organization RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), which frowns upon Christian and other non-Hindu holidays, and was therefore not comfortable depicting a Christian icon like Santa Claus.

At lunchtime I would leave the artists' enclave to join the women in the editorial room. This glassed-in room occupied one end of the office, next to the publisher's own glass office, and overlooked the row of artists' desks. Here I would spend the afternoons with the four on-site editors, who were upper middle-class Hindu and Christian women with excellent English skills. These women pared down the textual stories (researched and written by freelance authors in the case of *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, submitted by fans or written in-house by the editors in the case of *Tinkle* comics) and transformed them into actual comic book scripts with panel divisions, dialogue text, and visual instructions for the artist. These comic books are semi-programmed literature/art in that they are highly formulaic and repetitive, and are designed for an explicit, already-constituted audience of middle-class Indian schoolchildren. Yet, here too I learned that even though authors and editors, like artists, are encouraged to work within the comic book template, at times they too challenge that template in significant ways. For instance, one afternoon while scripting a story about a princess for an upcoming *Tinkle* issue, subeditor Priya Khanna suddenly asked, "Why must the princess always get married? Why can't she wish for peace in the kingdom instead of her marriage?" Even though the story had already been approved by the publisher, associate editor Reena Puri calmly responded,

[40] Anonymous artist 1, interviewed by the author in Mumbai on November 1, 2001.

"Okay, write it that way and then let me read it."[41] Here again we see how a person's identity – this time Priya's identification as a woman and social activist – can impact the production process. Because it was a fictitious story for *Tinkle*, the publisher ultimately gave Priya freedom to conclude the story as she saw fit. However, Anant Pai did not relinquish control of the *Amar Chitra Katha* template so easily. The *Akbar* issue (no. 200, 1979) exemplifies the kind of conflict that could occur during the creation of one of these comic books. Scriptwriter Toni Patel wanted to depict a scene in which the sixteenth-century Mughal Emperor Akbar beheaded a rival king and hung his body at Delhi's gate. Anant Pai overruled this scene. A debate ensued, with Patel claiming that the panel must remain because it was truthful, and Pai insisting that it was too violent for an educational children's publication and that the narrative emphasis should be on Akbar's "accommodating qualities," rather than his cruelty, for in his opinion Akbar was the only Muslim ruler in India who adopted a secular policy of governance.[42] A compromise was ultimately reached: the headless body was shown, but only in shadows in the background of the panel. In my view, a multiplicity of intended messages can result from such tensions between multiple creators over the constitution of "Indianness" and between the creative, educational, and economic processes.

During my days at the comic book studio, I would also routinely stop by the other glass office – the publisher's office – for a conversation with Anant Pai about his reasons for founding the comic book series, or to pose questions to him about specific titles that arose from my content analysis, or to ask him about editorial and marketing decisions and policies. In this way, I was able to conduct an extended series of in-depth interviews with him. In the first several months of my field research I spent every weekday at the comic

[41] Priya Khanna and Reena Puri, in conversation with the author in Mumbai on October 11, 2001.
[42] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai on February 18, 2002.

book studio; thereafter I reduced my time in the studio to three days a week, spending the other days interviewing the freelance authors and artists who resided in the greater Mumbai area. Many of these authors and artists had been involved with *Amar Chitra Katha* for many years, and were instrumental to the success of the series, like artist Ram Waeerkar and former associate editors/authors Subba Rao, Yagya Sharma, and Margie Sastry; others were occasional contributors, including authors Pushpa Bharati, Luis Fernandes, Satyavrata Ghosh, Laila Mahajan, M.L. Mitra and Debrani Mitra, and Rajinder Singh Raj. I was able to visit most of these people on several occasions for follow-up interviews. I also took time away from the studio to travel to various cities in order to interview the freelance authors and artists who had been long-term contributors to *Amar Chitra Katha*, including former associate editor/author Kamala Chandrakant (in Chennai), artist Souren Roy (in Kolkata), and artists Pratap Mulick and Dilip Kadam (in Pune). Regrettably, my trip to Ahmedabad to interview artist Yusuf Bangalorewala (formerly Yusuf Lien) in the spring of 2002 had to be canceled when communal riots broke out and a curfew was imposed throughout much of Gujarat for a couple of months; however, Yusuf and I have been able to communicate on several occasions via telephone and email.

The central core of my study draws upon my analyses of the content and the production of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series. However, during the period of my field research I was also able to begin conducting research on the consumption of these comic books, and with this research I hope to lay a foundation for future studies of comic book reception in India. While at the comic book studio, I was able to read fan mail and subscription letters that were received during 2001-2, and to discuss the comics with those customers who came to the studio in person to make purchases (usually

consumers who were making large-quantity purchases to ship the entire series overseas to grandchildren or other relatives). I was also granted access to current and past official fan club membership lists. From these lists I contacted and spoke with dozens of former (now adult) *Amar Chitra Katha* fan club members in Mumbai and in the other urban centers that I visited (Pune, Delhi, Kolkata, and Chennai), as well as several smaller cities that I was able to travel to during the period of my field research (including Agra, Aurangabad, Bhubaneshwar, Lucknow, and Mamallapuram). I communicated with approximately fifty other former fan club members through mail, questionnaire forms, and email. While in Mumbai, I also visited several college campuses to speak with groups of college-age students about their comic reading habits, interviewed several school principals who use these comic books in the classroom and spoke with their students, interviewed neighbors in Colaba (an affluent neighborhood where I rented a room in a ladies' hostel for my first few months in Mumbai) and Vile Parle (a middle-class neighborhood where my husband and I rented a flat for the remainder of the year), and sought out bookstall owners in a variety of neighborhood bazaars who sell these comic books and the customers who buy them. Finally, I also met with groups of comic book consumers within the U.S. and U.K. diaspora communities during the summer of 2002.

By interviewing readers across the class spectrum, in northern and southern India and the diaspora, of a variety of religious affiliations, both male and female, I hoped to begin to discern who consumes *Amar Chitra Katha* comics and how they negotiate the ideology of these comic books, and thus shed some light on some of the many layers of influence in an individual's or interpretive community's construction of identities. In viewing comic books as public culture, this project builds upon previous scholarship which has demonstrated that religion, gender, nationality, ethnicity, class, caste, and

sexuality can impact reading and viewing habits, and that communities united around one or more of these identity markers may apply strategies of alternative readings/viewings.[43] For instance, these comic books have been accused on several occasions of being anti-Muslim and of condoning violence to women.[44] Yet several of the Hindu, Christian, and Parsi readers I interviewed saw the *Akbar* issue mentioned above as an example of India's tolerant, secular past, while several Muslims instead saw it as a token nod to political correctness that does not compensate for the general absence of modern Indo-Muslim figures or the widespread depiction of Muslims as the invading, conquering "other." Similarly, while several female readers voiced their disapproval of the glorification of *sati* (widow immolation) in *Padmini* (no. 44, 1973) and other comic book issues, many male and female readers described Padmini as an ideal heroine for her action. By deploying ethnography strategically in connection with my analyses of content and production, I want to suggest in the following chapters both the power of *Amar Chitra Katha* in producing hegemonic readings/viewings of "Indianness," and the fact that these narratives of religion, gender, and nation are not totalizing in their effects.

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[43] See Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, "Introduction" to *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, op. cit., 3-4. Several excellent works on this subject include bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture: Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India*, op. cit.; Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991 [1984]); and Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[44] For instance, Anita Mannur, " 'The Glorious Heritage of India': Notes on the Politics of Amar Chitra Katha," *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2000), 32-33; Sandhya Rao, "Amar Chitra Katha Comics: A Quick-Fix Culture Course for Kids," *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2000), 33-35; Bulbul Pal, "Angry Young Men and Weepy Women," *Express Magazine* (November 22, 1987); Sanjay Joshi and Rajni Bakshi, "ACKs: Distorted History or Education?" *The Telegraph* (Sunday November 13, 1983), 8; Nandini Chandra, "Market Life of Amar Chitra Katha," op. cit., esp. pp. 26-27. Also see Frances Pritchett's comments in her article "The World of *Amar Chitra Katha*," op. cit., esp. pp. 95-96.

After an *India Abroad* article on my research in progress was published,[45] many fans in India as well as throughout the South Asian diaspora contacted me in order to express their love for these comics, to wish me luck on my dissertation, and with even more generous offers to share their comic book collections with me:

> Hi Ms. McLain, I am in Austin and one of my friend[s] in Virginia read about you in *India Abroad* newspaper, about your research project. They have lot of books of "Amar Chitra Katha" cartoon story books similar to Aesop Fables and want to send you if you need them and can use them… We appreciate your interest in Asian Culture and Languages…[46]

Others shared fond memories with me of collecting these comic books during their childhood, as did this 27-year-old Indian man now residing in the U.S.:

> [F]or the longest time I used to buy these comics off the newsstand. Thus, it resulted in a constant struggle with my parents for money. Fed up with my constant demands, the rule was that every Friday, I could buy a comic book. It worked for a while. However, I started gaming this system too. I would plead and buy a comic in advance forfeiting my Friday one. However come Friday, I'd beg and plead again. Also, I would take money from both parents and not tell them that the other one has already given me money for these comics. The newsstand guy was my first grown up friend. I used to go there everyday for half an hour I guess.[47]

This same fan also asked about the nature of my research and my commitment to the subject, given my non-Indian, "outsider" status:

> Out of curiosity are there other scholars who have worked on this before? Also, why is it you think that it did not occur to an Indian to do this before? … Lest you misunderstand, I am not suggesting that your working on this topic is any less legitimate than an Indian person's. I am only asking out of curiosity.[48]

Throughout the period I conducted my field research, several other fans expressed similar curiosity about my chosen subject, as did many comic book producers, asking why I had

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[45] Monika Joshi, "Remember Amar Chitra Katha Comics? Now, Someone's Doing a PhD on Them!" *India Abroad* (Feb. 7, 2003), A1 and A8.

[46] Anonymous fan 1 (U.S.), written correspondence with the author, March 24, 2003.

[47] Anonymous fan 2 (U.S.), written correspondence with the author, February 10, 2003.

[48] Anonymous fan 2, ibid.

chosen this topic, "considering the fact that you do not belong to an Indian background and that nobody in India would have thought that these comics are worth research for getting PhD."[49] Many asked for further information about my approach toward the comic books, which I provided. One fan, however, directly stated his reservations after responding to all of my questions: "I request everyone out there not to politicize Amar Chitra Katha… I would fight for it to the finish. It's the best thing that I have ever read. I will cherish it till I die."[50]

Much ado has been made in recent years over the subject of insider/outsider status. My own work has been most informed by those feminist ethnographers who have questioned such binaries. Purnima Mankekar, for instance, writes that she sees "the project of doing fieldwork at home as extending not just to the 'native' ethnographer, but to all scholars with enduring emotional and political ties to the communities in which they do their research."[51] As an American woman of Irish-Scottish heritage, I am indeed an "outsider" to South Asian culture. This status was made very clear to me at certain points during my field research, as when I arrived at the comic book studio to find a desk waiting for me, and learned several weeks later that the lead in-studio artist had been removed from that desk and repositioned at a smaller one for the duration of my stay. My discomfort at being assigned a "better" desk due to my foreign status never completely left me. But I would like to think that this outsider status has at least one benefit: that it has allowed me to look closer at a medium of public culture – Indian comic books – that has so far been overlooked as meriting academic attention. I would also like to think that as someone who has made South Asia her academic "home," who

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[49] Anonymous fan 3 (India), written correspondence with the author, October 18, 2002.
[50] Anonymous fan 4 (U.S.), written correspondence with the author, October 22, 2002.
[51] Purnima Mankekar, *Screen Culture, Viewing Politics*, op. cit., 32. Also see Kirin Narayan, "How Native is a Native Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist*, vol. 95 (1993), 671-686; and Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

will return again and again to India to conduct research and who will spend a lifetime teaching about South Asian religions in the classroom, I am not a complete outsider. Many of those I interviewed while conducting my field research are not just my "informants," but have become my friends, too. This is particularly true in the case of the women who worked as editors in the comic book studio, with whom I formed quick bonds, as we shared much in common beyond our respective work on comic books: extensive travel, an understanding of the need to and difficulty of a woman leaving behind a husband for a period to pursue her own work, and a love of Bollywood gossip. With others, especially the male artists in the studio, and Mr. Pai himself, a friendly working relationship was only formed over months of conversations about their work and my intentions.

Furthermore, like these comic book fans, I too share a fondness for this comic book series. I first encountered these comic books as an undergraduate student of Eastern religions. Struggling to familiarize myself with the lengthy Indian epics and to learn Hindi, I was immediately drawn to these comics for their creative renderings of classical Indian stories in both English and Hindi editions. As a graduate teaching assistant, I realized that these comic books were one of the primary vehicles through which many of my students of Indian heritage learned what it meant to be Indian. Hence, several years later, I turned to these comics as the subject of my dissertation. Although I cannot promise that my discussion of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books will never be political – on the contrary, I believe that these comics have rarely shied away from the political limelight, and that it is my duty as a scholar to consider the political implications of this medium – I can promise that my foremost goal has been to understand what has made the textual and visual narratives of this series so appealing to so many.

LAYOUT OF THE DISSERTATION

In this dissertation I've chosen to focus on an array of historical and mythological comic book issues that I have found to be especially rich for studying the construction of Indian identities. After providing a history of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series and an overview of the production process in Chapter 1, I have organized each chapter around an in-depth case study of a particular comic book or group of related comic books that explore different facets of "Indianness."

In Chapter 2, I take up the subject of narrative authenticity and poetic license to explore how the story of the Hindu goddess Durga is told in this comic book medium. Which stories of the goddess do the producers regard as authentic, and which stories are rejected as models for this new rendition? What novelties are introduced into the story through this sequential medium? And does this latest telling of Durga's story represent a particular regional influence, or is it instead part of the culture of the rising Hindu middle classes?

In Chapter 3, I consider the representation of mythological women in the comic book series, discussing the ways in which this concept of "the Indian woman" is indebted to the feminine ideal that arose within the context of colonial modernity. In addition to questioning how male and female producers and consumers have reacted to this feminine ideal, I also discuss an alternate mode of femininity that can be found in the tales of historical women that are told in this comic book series.

In Chapter 4, I examine the narrative strategies employed in the telling of the very first historical comic book, *Shivaji* (no. 23, 1971), about a seventeenth-century king from Western India. In this chapter I ask why this Hindu king was chosen for the first historical comic book, and what this choice tells us about the place of regional and caste

identities in this comic book series. I also ask what it means to emplot historical "heroes" in the same manner as mythological figures.

In Chapter 5, I look at the group of comic books about the Mughal emperors, a Muslim dynasty that ruled in South Asia from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Here I examine the presentation of Muslim heroes and antiheroes, asking why heterodox Muslims are characterized so differently from orthodox Muslims, how the producers and consumers of this comic book series view the place of Muslims in India today, and what this means for contemporary Hindu-Muslim relations.

In Chapter 6, I examine the comic book issues on colonial-era freedom fighters, focusing especially on the depiction of Mahatma Gandhi in these issues. I look at the points at which the relationship between text and image becomes a site of conflict in these issues, and draw upon my interviews with various authors and artists, in order to better understand the divide between the non-violent and revolutionary approaches to Indian nationalism and the place of Gandhi in India's national identity.

In Chapter 7, I conclude by summarizing the findings of the previous chapters in order to explore how the study of Indian comic books can enrich not only our understanding of what it means to be Indian today, but also the study of media, religion, and culture more generally.

Finally, in the Appendix, I provide a chronological list of all original *Amar Chitra Katha* titles, deluxe edition reprints, and bumper issues. The names of the authors and artists of each issue, when known, are also provided. I hope that this information and my analysis of it will help to establish foundations for further research that will bring India's comic books into the discourse about the global community.

Chapter 1: Creating Immortal Picture Stories

THE 'FATHER OF INDIAN COMICS'

Anant Pai was born into an orthodox Brahmin Vaishnava family in 1929 in a small town in the southern Indian state of Kerala.[1] Orphaned at a young age, Pai moved to Bombay as a teenager to live with family, and there attended Wilson College where he studied science and graduated with a degree in chemical engineering in 1952. Yet despite his background in science, from a young age Pai was drawn to the publishing world. In many ways, the story of *Amar Chitra Katha* is Anant Pai's story as well. This comic book series was founded by him in 1967, and is still edited by him today. Throughout the past four decades Pai has written many scripts himself, and has closely overseen the production of each issue. Because of his close and prolonged involvement with this comic book series, Anant Pai's own beliefs have had a more substantial impact upon these comics than have any other single person's. In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the founding of *Amar Chitra Katha*, the production process, and the marketing of this series. I will also begin to consider how these comic books chart changing religious beliefs and practices through Anant Pai as a devout Hindu, and how the concept of "Indianness" presented in these comic books has been arrived at through the interaction of the founder with editors, authors, artists, and fans in the production and consumption processes, but is also tempered by dominant discourses about religion and the nation.

Anant Pai conceived of this comic book series as a means of teaching Indian themes and values to Indian children being educated in English-medium schools who he

[1] The biographical information provided here on Anant Pai is compiled from interviews the author conducted with him in Mumbai in 2001-2002. Also see V. Gangadhar, "Anant Pai and His *Amar Chitra Kathas*," *Reader's Digest* [of India] (Aug. 1988), 137-141.

feared were learning Western history and mythology at the expense of their own. A natural storyteller, the tale that Mr. Pai tells of the founding moment is this:

> In February of 1967, my wife and I were visiting Delhi, and we stopped at Maharaja Lal & Sons bookstore. The TV was on in the bookstore – Bombay did not have TV yet, only Delhi, and only black and white – and the program was a quiz contest featuring five students from St. Stephen's College. When they were asked, the students could not name the mother of Lord Ram. I was disappointed, but I thought, well, that is from a long time ago. But then a question came about Greek gods on Mt. Olympus, and the children could answer that question! This is the trouble with our education system: children are getting alienated from their own culture.[2]

Finding it somewhat ironic that the Western comic book format was the vehicle of choice for educating Indian children about their own heritage, I asked Mr. Pai why he chose this medium. He replied:

> Believe it or not, I was never a comic buff myself, not until I started to make them! But my nephews read [foreign] comics and were just fascinated by them. Seeing their interest, I got the idea to create comic books on Indian culture. Now I am the "Father of Indian Comics."[3]

Anant Pai first became acquainted with the comic book medium in the 1960s, while working at *The Times of India*. In addition to rotary presses, the publisher of *The Times*, Bennet, Coleman & Co., also had sheet-fed presses that remained idle except during the calendar printing season. It was with the idea of keeping these machines busy, recalls Pai, that his boss forwarded several imported *Superman* comic books to him and asked him to look into the possibility of reprinting some such comic under *The Times'* banner. Pai did some research and then suggested that they begin with a 32-page comic book, with the first half consisting of *The Phantom* tales and the second half of locally produced comic tales.[4] The idea was approved, and *Indrajal Comics* was born. In 1964 the first issue, *The Phantom's Belt*, was released. The first thirty-two issues contained

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[2] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 5, 2002.
[3] Anant Pai, ibid.
[4] Anant Pai, "Mythology in Pictures," *Gentleman* (February 2000), 38.

tales from *The Phantom*, and tales about *Mandrake*, *Flash Gordon*, and *Buz Sawyer* followed thereafter. *Indrajal Comics* was a success, but the comic books were nonetheless not quite what Anant Pai had envisioned. The second half of each issue never featured locally produced comics. Instead, the latter half of the first several *Indrajal* issues was devoted to general knowledge, quizzes, and the like. The comic "half" grew regularly while the general knowledge "half" got proportionally smaller until, at issue 29, *The Phantom* comic tales took over all thirty-two pages.[5]

The idea of creating Indian comic book tales resurfaced once again while Anant Pai was visiting Delhi in 1967. Upon his return to Bombay, he took this idea to several publishers, but none were interested. Finally, he met with the late H.G. Mirchandani, the Publishing Director at India Book House (IBH), who was intrigued by the idea and hired Anant Pai to be the editor of the new comic book series, *Amar Chitra Katha*. After ten poor-selling Hindi translations of illustrated classics like "Cinderella," "Snow White," and "Red Riding Hood," Anant Pai was finally allowed to publish his first Indian comic book.[6] *Krishna* (no. 11), the first title of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, was released in 1969 **[Fig. 1.1]**. Written by Anant Pai himself, this issue was published in English, not Hindi, for Anant Pai knew from his experience with *Indrajal Comics* that the market for such comic books was the English-speaking middle classes.

LIFTING THE MOUNTAIN

The *Krishna* comic book features several key episodes in the life of the Hindu god Krishna that Anant Pai says are drawn from the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (although the *Harivaṃśa* also appears to be a source, as do more popular renditions of both texts). The comic tells of Krishna's birth, his victory over the demoness Putana as a baby, his various

[5] My thanks to Bryan Shedden, *The Phantom* fan, for verifying these facts. His fan website can be found at http://www.deepwoods.org/indrajal.html.

[6] This is why the *Amar Chitra Katha* series officially begins with number 11.

schemes to steal butter as a boy in Gokul, his escapades with the *gopis* (cowherdesses) as an adolescent in Vrindavan, and his martial feats in Mathura. For Pai, a devotee of Krishna, the decision to make this deity the "hero" of his first comic book was easy. He explained:

> Krishna is the most popular god. You see, Ram, he is the ideal man: he never lies, he is a filial son, a loving brother, etc. But Krishna, he is a real life character, a human figure – that means he actually lived, and also means he sometimes tells lies, steals butter, etc. He is like us. We can relate to him better than to Ram.[7]

But it was not as easy to decide exactly how to tell the story. In producing this first issue, Pai faced a serious dilemma: although he had already decided to base the *Krishna* script on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, he was uncertain how loyal he should be to the Sanskrit text. Should he adapt it as literally as possible for the comic book medium, or update it in accord with modern scientific reasoning? He described his uncertainty to me in this way:

> With mythology so many things that we read don't seem natural or possible. … You know the story of how Krishna lifts the Govardhan Mountain on his one finger? Well, is this possible? Scientifically it is not. So I didn't show this, there was no image of Krishna lifting the mountain. Instead, I just had people talking about it, saying, "Look, Krishna has lifted the mountain to shelter us." That way I didn't show something unscientific, but didn't completely ignore this episode in the story either.[8]

With his scientific background, Anant Pai found it difficult to comprehend the emphasis on miracles in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and other mythological narratives of Krishna's life. If Krishna was indeed a real man, a human incarnation of the god Vishnu, he wondered, then in this human form how could he have been physically capable of lifting a mountain on one finger? Feeling that the belief in miracles like the lifting of the Govardhan Mountain belonged to an earlier pre-modern, more "superstitious" era than the modern, scientific one, Pai decided the best tactic was to mention all of the key events

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[7] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 2, 2002.
[8] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 17, 2002.

of the life of Krishna in the comic book, but to refrain from depicting them as miracles. Instead, he worked to minimize the miraculous nature of these events.

After Anant Pai had written the *Krishna* script, he had to find an artist who could illustrate it. But finding capable artists for the illustration and the cover art for this first comic book issue was not an easy task. Although there was no lack of interest in these jobs, the novelty of the medium in India proved difficult for aspiring comic book artists. Anant Pai recalled this initial difficulty:

> When I began, there were no institutes that trained comic book artists. I found artists at advertising agencies, and some fine artists too like Yusuf [Bangalorewala] and Pratap [Mulick]. But even the fine artists, they did not know how to work in this art form. It was very new. So in the beginning they had to redraw and redraw and redraw the panels.[9]

The *Krishna* cover was created by artist Yusuf Bangalorewala, and features Krishna as a mischievous child, looking over his shoulder as he digs into the forbidden butter pot. Yusuf was a fan of the comic book genre, and was excited about the opportunity to work in this medium: "Always wanting to illustrate comic books, I struck pay dirt when I met Anant Pai. He gave me my first break in comic book illustration."[10] The illustration for the first issue was done by Ram Waeerkar, a good friend of Anant Pai's who had previously worked as an artist for a prominent advertising agency in Bombay. A long-time fan of *Tarzan* comics, he too was thrilled at the prospect of working on the *Krishna* comic book:

> I did not need any visual models for *Krishna*. Technically, I was studying since childhood that subject. So I did my drawings from memory. I knew the mythology. So only thing that I was looking for was the opportunity. Generally, I knew the comic style, too, from reading comics as a boy. At that time, say around '50 and '60, it was *Tarzan*. I fell in love with *Tarzan*, with that kind of style.[11]

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[9] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 2, 2002.
[10] Yusuf Bangalorewala, written correspondence with the author, April 12, 2002.
[11] Ram Waeerkar, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, October 23, 2001.

Excited about the opportunity to illustrate *Krishna*, Ram Waeerkar quickly went to work. The late Mr. Waeerkar always took pride in his speed, stating on many occasions that each comic book has "150 frames, and they must be done quickly… I make the drawings very fast. I am the fastest artist."[12] Yet, this first issue progressed very slowly. Pai had given very specific visual instructions, and did not hesitate to ask for revisions. As the very first issue in what Pai hoped would be a successful comic book series with many titles, it was more important to get this issue just right and set the tone for future comic books than it was to meet a strict production schedule. Pai was content with Waeerkar's style, as long as the influence of *Tarzan* did not extend to the depiction of Krishna himself. Hence although Krishna remains a slim, boy-like figure, the other men in this and other comic books illustrated by Ram Waeerkar often have an overdeveloped musculature, holding their exaggerated, bulging upper bodies in common with Tarzan.[13] Aside from ensuring that Krishna retained his adolescent quality, a number of the other revisions Pai asked for had to do with the nature of the medium. For instance, he insisted upon a number of active panels and heroic close-ups; visual consistency with the characters for quick recognizability; and sought a general agreement between text and image. He was also very concerned with the depiction of authentic period costume, architecture, and weaponry. But many of the revisions for this issue had to do specifically with the depiction of events in the life of Krishna that were commonly regarded as miraculous.

Popular myths about the birth of Krishna are usually full of miraculous elements. Here is an abbreviated version of this birth story: Kamsa, the cruel king of Mathura, hears a prophecy that the eighth child born to his cousin Devaki and her husband Vasudeva will

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[12] Ram Waeerkar, ibid.

[13] On the depiction of Tarzan in comics, see Thomas A. Pendleton, "Tarzan of the Papers," *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 12, no. 4 (Spring 1979), 691-701.

kill him. He therefore imprisons Devaki and Vasudeva and vows to kill their eighth child. But when Krishna is born to them as their eighth child, Vasudeva is able to escape with the infant. He rushes baby Krishna to a house in Gokul where another woman, Yashoda, has just given birth to a girl. After exchanging the two children, Vasudeva returns safely to his prison chamber with the girl child, thereby saving Krishna. During this sequence, Vasudeva's chains miraculously break, the prison guards remain asleep and do not awaken during his escape, and the Yamuna River parts for Vasudeva's journey to Gokul. Struggling with his scientific conscience and the limits of his own faith, Pai walked a fine line between presenting these events as scientifically plausible and as miraculous occurrences in the comic book. The parting of the Yamuna River proved particularly challenging. In this panel, Pai's script called for narrative text at the top stating that the "Yamuna was heavily flooded, but the rains soon stopped." And the dialogue balloon for Vasudeva has him thinking, "Why, it isn't at all deep here. Or is this also a miracle?"[14] Here the text allows for ambivalence: A reader could choose to interpret this incident as a miracle if he or she was so inclined, or else as a fortunate break for poor Vasudeva. Pai wanted the image to be equally ambivalent. He asked Waeerkar to redraw it again and again, until finally the river looked as though it could be parting, or could equally just be a low ebb in the current.[15]

Similarly, Pai was intentionally ambivalent in his portrayal of Krishna lifting the mountain. Popular renditions of this episode hold that Krishna, then an adolescent, suggests to the people of Vrindavan that rather than worship the god Indra, they should instead worship the Govardhan Mountain, for it is what protects the village and provides the villagers with sustenance. The people agree, and proceed to worship the mountain.

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[14] *Krishna*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 11 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1969), 6.
[15] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 2, 2002.

As they do, Lord Indra grows increasingly angry and decides to teach them a lesson by showering them with a magnificent storm. But Krishna comes to their rescue by miraculously lifting the mountain on one pinky finger and sheltering the whole village with it for seven days and seven nights, until Indra's fury has waned. Although Ram Waeerkar originally penciled this incident featuring a large panel of Krishna lifting the mountain, Anant Pai was adamant that this should not be shown. Instead, he instructed Waeerkar to do a new pencil sketch with several panels: one showing Krishna leading the villagers towards the mountain in the midst of a downpour; one showing the people looking surprised as boulders began to topple and a rumbling sound was heard, and another depicting the villagers with their mouths gaping as they exclaimed in dialogue balloons, "Govardhana is moving!" and "Look! It's rising!"[16] Only after several pencil sketches was this scene finally approved and inked. Ultimately, the actual lifting of the mountain was not shown, and Anant Pai left it to the reader to infer the miraculous nature of this incident.

Because of these and other retakes, the creation of this first *Amar Chitra Katha* issue took significant time. Finally, after two long years of work, it was released in 1969. In the next year, *Krishna* was followed by *Shakuntala* (no. 12, 1970), *The Pandava Princes* (no. 13, 1970), *Savitri* (no. 14, 1970), and *Rama* (no. 15, 1970). Now, Mr. Pai hoped, every Indian child would read his comics and be able to confidently name the mother of Lord Ram and recount tales of Krishna's bravery – tales that allowed for scientific explanations of events as easily as for miraculous ones. In these issues and in those that followed, the policy of minimizing the miraculous was strictly adopted. In his discussion of the *Mirabai* issue (no. 36, 1972), for instance, John Stratton Hawley notes

[16] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 3, 2002; *Krishna*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 11, op. cit., 6.

that the ending of this comic book has Krishna bending over to receive a swooning Mira, rather than the traditional ending of Mirabai being completely absorbed into the idol of Krishna at Dvaraka. This ending, he observes, "does not exactly contradict the traditional story, but it also does not exactly repeat it: the element of miracle has been omitted."[17]

Sales of *Krishna* were initially a bit slow, less than 20,000 copies during the first three years, but Anant Pai persisted. He put out a call for scripts, hired freelance authors and artists, and worked to market his comic book series. Originally, the production goal was to create a new comic book every month; but by 1974 the producers had beaten this goal and were releasing a new issue every two weeks to eager fans. In the 1950s and 60s, imported American comic books like Lee Falk's *The Phantom* and Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan* were the most popular comics in India. The few Indian comic books that were around prior to *Amar Chitra Katha* remained regional products. But as sales continued to rise, *Amar Chitra Katha* overtook even the foreign competition by the end of the 1970s, becoming the best-selling comic book series in India. Today, *Krishna* is one of the most popular *Amar Chitra Katha* titles; it has been reprinted more than 60 times and has easily sold over a million copies.[18]

Significantly, however, this successful *Krishna* title is not the original one that Pai and Waeerkar had worked so laboriously over for two years. Indeed, as I studied the production and consumption of this comic book series, I only learned of the existence of the original *Krishna* issue as I browsed through used bookstalls in various neighborhood bazaars, purchasing old *Amar Chitra Katha* titles here and there in order to speak with vendors and learn more about the secondhand market in comic books. In one such bazaar

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[17] John Stratton Hawley, "The Saints Subdued: Domestic Virtue and National Integration in *Amar Chitra Katha*," in L. Babb and S. Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 115.

[18] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 17, 2002. Mr. Pai did not have specific figures for this title alone, but stated that these were conservative numbers, in his opinion.

in Bombay's Santa Cruz neighborhood, I came upon a tattered edition of *Krishna* with the cover missing and a lot of children's coloring marks throughout it. As I flipped through this well-used comic book to examine the second layer of artwork added by the child, I noticed that this *Krishna* was not, in fact, the same *Krishna* title I had expected, although it was clearly an *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book and, based on stylistic evidence, it had clearly been illustrated by the same artist, Ram Waeerkar. This *Krishna* did not feature any miraculous events, even the lifting of the mountain! Intrigued, I returned to the comic book studio with a new set of questions.[19]

The *Krishna* reprints that circulate today – the version of *Krishna* that I was familiar with – do feature Krishna lifting the mountain **[Fig. 1.2]**. In a large half-page panel, Krishna lifts the mountain on one finger, while the villagers run to him for shelter and one of them proclaims the act to be a miracle: "It's a miracle! Krishna is holding the mighty Govardhana on his little finger!"[20] Although I had spent months studying all of the original editions of the *Amar Chitra Katha* titles in the library at India Book House, I learned that day that the "original" *Krishna* issue in the library's collection was only an original edition of the later, revised version. When I asked how this revised version came about, Mr. Pai explained that as his company grew and he employed more artists and authors – all of whom studied the first issue like a reference manual – questions repeatedly arose about the portrayal of this episode. Many readers had also written in with questions and criticisms of their own. As he thought about these questions over the years, Anant Pai had something of an epiphany. Ultimately, Mr. Pai decided to release a second, revised version. He commented:

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[19] For an interesting account of one fan's (or former fan's) discovery of the revision, see Chetan Desai, "The *Krishna* Conspiracy," *International Journal of Comic Art* (Spring 2003), 325-333. Desai characterizes the revision as a betrayal and "a most audacious publishing con."

[20] *Krishna*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 501 (deluxe edition reprint, Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., reprint 1992), 6.

> I realized that people look on *ACK* as something sacred, too. … So, the *Krishna* that you see today, it is different from the original one. The old records were junked and the artworks were destroyed. Now *Krishna* shows him lifting the mountain. And it is the most popular issue, too – people want to see Krishna lifting the mountain. This I have learned.[21]

It was sometime around the year 1980 when Anant Pai got together with his associate editor Kamala Chandrakant and artist Ram Waeekar to redo the original *Krishna* comic book. In this revised edition, they decided, all ambiguity about the nature of Krishna's acts would be dispelled in favor of a clear proclamation of their miraculous nature. A new script was written by Anant Pai with input from Kamala Chandrakant, and completely new illustrations were created by Ram Waeerkar. The parting of the Yamuna River, for example, was re-scripted so that the incident now occupied a full page with four large panels **[Fig. 1.3]**. In the first panel, Vasudeva stands on one side of the riverbank, with the basket containing baby Krishna on his head. The river is very full, nearly overflowing the riverbank. Crossing it looks impossible. In the next panel, however, the river parts, revealing a path through the water that Vasudeva crosses on foot in the third panel. In the final panel on this page, Vasudeva stands on the opposite riverbank, having now crossed the river in spate. Unlike the original panel depicting this scene in which Vasudeva wades into a shallow spot in the river, the clear images here of a path through the river that is cresting higher than Vasudeva's head leave no ambiguity that what has taken place is truly a miracle.

Furthermore, in addition to the Govardhan mountain episode, other events are also clearly marked as miracles in this revised edition, so that text and image agree in this presentation of Krishna's mythology. Immediately after Krishna's birth, Vasudeva despairs over his helplessness to rescue Krishna while being held as a prisoner, when suddenly his chains break and the door to his prison cell flings open. He exclaims, "It's a

[21] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 17, 2002.

miracle!" and then, grabbing the baby, makes his escape past the sleeping guards.[22] When as a boy Krishna uproots trees, the villagers say, "This boy is a marvel!"; when he subdues the serpent Kaliya they exclaim, "What a boy!"; and when Trivakra's humped back suddenly straightens after she touches Krishna's feet, they whisper to one another, "A miracle! He must be our saviour."[23]

These miraculous episodes are all extremely important parts of Krishna's mythology, for they demonstrate his power, the fact that he is something more than human, a god in human form. And whereas this superhuman nature of Krishna is a central tenet of the revised comic book edition, it had to be inferred from the original. For instance, the first edition featured Krishna fighting an elephant in a single close-up panel in which he whacks it with his mace in a one-on-one battle. As far as comics go, this is a pretty realistic scene: Krishna's actions are not superhuman here. But the revised edition draws this battle out into a full-page sequence, showing Krishna swinging the elephant upside down by his trunk in one panel and hurling him into the air in the next, clearly the master of the situation and completely undaunted by the size of the beast, as any comic book hero – or god – should be. Through these episodes, Krishna is shown to be not only the master of beasts, but the master of gods, as well. Indeed, this is the very point of the Govardhan Mountain episode. By lifting the mountain on his pinky finger, Krishna demonstrates to the villagers of Vrindavan – and to the comic book readers – that he is not just an adolescent boy who is good at herding cattle and playing the flute; he is capable of inhuman feats of strength, feats that protect those who believe in him and that only a god could accomplish. By outlasting Indra's storm and sheltering the people

[22] *Krishna*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 501, op. cit., 5.
[23] *Krishna*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 501, ibid., 15, 20, and 25.

under the mountain all the while, he demonstrates that he is more powerful even than Indra, king of the gods.

For the revised edition of *Krishna*, Mr. Pai and Ms. Chandrakant found that the production process was much faster than it had been for the original edition. Certainly, this was partly due to the years of experience that they now had in producing Indian comic books. But they also attribute this ease in producing the revised issue to the synchronicity between text and image that the new script allowed for. Kamala Chandrakant described to me how text and image should ideally work together in the comic book medium:

> [T]he text and image should match perfectly. You see, the author gives the visual instructions. If the artist is good, then after the image is drawn some of the text will be deleted by the editor. When I edited the comic books I would delete some of the text if the text and image said the same thing, if the image could stand on its own. But if it is a weak image, then the copy is necessary. And often the script itself must be changed before an image can even be made.[24]

In the original *Krishna* issue, many of the images were what she calls "weak" images, images that cannot stand on their own, and must have some textual explanation. The most prominent example of this is the Govardhan Mountain scene, in which Krishna is not shown lifting the mountain. Here the reader is uncertain from the images about the events taking place: The only certainty the reader has from these panels is that the villagers are in awe, as their startled faces and gaping mouths demonstrate. It is to the text that the reader must turn for an explanation, and only from the dialogue balloons does the reader learn that Krishna is lifting the mountain. In the revised *Krishna* edition, however, there was no concern to maintain a sense of ambiguity about the miraculous events associated with Krishna, so there was no need for such "weak" images. Instead, "strong" images could be used, images that could be understood on their own, without the

[24] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002. See Chapter 6 for a further consideration of text-image relations.

aid of any textual commentary or explanation. The Govardhan Mountain scene in this edition is such a "strong" image: The reader can look at it and see Krishna lifting the mountain on his pinky finger and can discern that this is truly a miraculous act without the aid of any text. Here, the text serves only to complement the image, not to explain it.

Producing the revised *Krishna* edition was a mere matter of months, not years. The script was rewritten in about one month, and artist Ram Waeerkar was able to complete the penciling and inking in just over another month, far faster than his work had progressed for the original edition. For Waeerkar, a Vaishnava himself and devotee of Krishna, the new visual instructions were much more "natural": "I know what Krishna looks like lifting the mountain, I know what Krishna looks like stealing the butter, or dancing on the hood of Kaliya, or in the middle of the battlefield. These images are natural for me."[25]

When asked about his change of heart regarding the depiction of miracles, Anant Pai explained to me how he came to realize that people regard these mythological comic books as something "sacred":

> This was in 1975, when there was a Ramayana Mela here in Bombay. People came from all over the world for this. There was a query: Who is the mother of Ram? And a man said "*ACK* says it is Kaushalya, so it must be so." This made me realize that I must be accurate, that people think the *ACK*s are a legitimate source of these sacred stories.[26]

So, how does Anant Pai reconcile his faith with his scientific background? When I asked him this question, he replied, "Now I don't tamper with mythology; I present it as it is, because mythology is sacred. This I have learned. I was a student of science, you know. But sometimes science must be kept aside, separate."[27]

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[25] Ram Waeerkar, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, October 23, 2001.
[26] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 17, 2002.
[27] Anant Pai, ibid.

When Anant Pai created the original *Krishna* comic book, he drew upon the tradition of narrative liberalism in order to tell the story of Krishna not only in a new medium – the comic book format – but also in a new, more modern way: a way that allowed for either a scientific explanation of so-called "miraculous" events, or for a more faith-based acceptance of the miracles associated with Krishna. Yet over the years, Pai began to feel more of a sense of responsibility towards textual authority, and less freedom for poetic license with mythological narratives. He has come to the realization that many of the miraculous events in mythological narratives need not be understood literally; rather, they can be understood as containing deeper, symbolic meanings. For this reason, he now believes, the belief in miracles need not conflict with a scientific outlook. Thus, these miracles have a place in modern India and, especially, in these Indian comic books. He explained:

> For example, the *Tales of Durga* issue [no. 176, 1978], it is based on the *Devī Māhātmya*. … In the story Durga shoots her arrows at the demon Mahisha Asura, and from every drop of blood that the demon sheds a new demon arises. This has a symbolic meaning: it means that you can't cure violence with violence. But if I changed the story because it is not scientific, then these symbolic meanings are also altered. I can give you another example. The Ocean of Milk, it is churned in search of nectar, but first poison comes out, not the nectar. This is also symbolic. It means that daring to doubt your faith brings you uncertainty, and unhappiness also. This is the poison. But if you keep churning, then all your doubts eventually become clear, and you receive the amrit – the nectar – finally. … All of the mythological stories have symbolic meanings that are changed if you change the story. So we must tell these stories accurately, without changes.[28]

In the end, daring to doubt his faith has indeed resulted in nectar for Anant Pai. Not only does he feel he has a better understanding of his own faith and of the god Krishna because of his effort to "keep churning" through his spiritual questions, but he

[28] Anant Pai, ibid.

also has made a very successful venture of his comic book series, which is best known for its mythological and miraculous tales of the Hindu gods.

PRODUCING *AMAR CHITRA KATHA*

As the popularity of the comic book series was waxing, and issues began to be sold at bookstores, street bookstalls, and in train stations across the country, issues featuring historical heroes were added to the corpus. These new historical heroes were premodern martial figures at first, with modern figures of national stature following several years later. The first historical titles were *Shivaji* (no. 23, 1971), *Rana Pratap* (no. 24, 1971), *Prithviraj Chauhan* (no. 25, 1971), and *Guru Gobind Singh* (no. 32, 1972). Thus both historical and mythological figures are "immortalized" in this popular comic book series, and due to the formulaic template employed in the production process, the line between the two categories – the mythological and the historical – is often blurred.

Each new *Amar Chitra Katha* issue, whether mythological or historical, begins with an idea for a story that revolves around a central character – the hero. Typically, a freelance author is assigned a hero or given a choice of several heroes that the editors have already decided would make good protagonists. The author must then conduct a significant amount of research before they can write the story. Because the heroes of these comic books are mythological or historical figures, the authors must become familiar with the classical mythological tales, in the case of the former, or the biographical details, in the case of the latter. One author, M.L. Mitra, put it this way: "You see, writing a comic is not original writing here, as it is with *Phantom* or *Mandrake* – it is myth or biography – and they are the original, those Sanskrit stories and other sources, not your writing."[29] As previously mentioned, Anant Pai became more of a

[29] M.L. Mitra, interviewed by the author in Navi Mumbai, January 15, 2002.

stickler for accurate textual and visual details after he realized that some readers view these comic books as authentic – even sacred – renderings. Kamala Chandrakant, former author and associate editor of *Amar Chitra Katha* from 1971 to 1986, recalls, "Mr. Anant Pai was very knowledgeable about period costume, hairstyles, headgear, weapons and architecture and scrutinizing the artworks for authenticity in these areas was entirely taken care of by him."[30] Anant Pai did indeed scrutinize the visual details of both the mythological and the historical comic books:

> In the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* references are given. For example, usually chariots were shown with four wheels. But there should only be two wheels on a chariot. There is a passage in the *Mahābhārata* where a god is asked to protect a chariot's right wheel in battle, and another god is asked to protect the left wheel. Not the right wheels and left wheels. So there were only two wheels. Things like this we would tell the artist. … For [historical] issues we had to ask, what did trains look like back then? What did the houseboat look like, when Rabindranath Tagore and Vivekananda met?[31]

Former author and associate editor Subba Rao recalled that the majority of the visual references came from books, due to budget limitations. However, the concern with verisimilitude was so great that the staff would often go out of their way to acquire visual reference material:

> For something like *Elephanta* [no. 149, 1977], that issue is different. Elephanta is near [Mumbai], so we could go, snap photos, and so the art for that one is different, more detailed, accurate. But for many issues we cannot do that. The *Krishnadeva Raya* [no. 151, 1978] issue, that one is also accurate. I went to Hampi, because it is near my [ancestral] place – I went on my budget, not on *ACK*'s – and I took some snaps. So in the comic there is that path between the two rocks that is shown – that is still there today.[32]

The panel in the *Krishnadeva Raya* issue (no. 151, 1978) featuring troops marching across a detailed landscape **[Fig. 1.4]** is evidence of the use of visual references in the making of this comic book issue.

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[30] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.
[31] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 26, 2002.
[32] Subba Rao, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 5, 2002.

Kamala Chandrakant's concern, on the other hand, was with textual accuracy and authenticity. She did a lot of research before writing or editing a script, and maintains that "[m]ore than seventy per cent of the titles in the *ACK* series were born out of the dusty, crumbling volumes, mostly the works of Bengali and European scholars, in the Royal Asiatic Society's library."[33] In the following chapters I will explore the impact of these sources upon the comic book narratives; here in this production discussion, I limit my concern to the timeline. The *Jahangir* (no. 221, 1980) issue, for instance, was researched and written by Ms. Chandrakant over the course of seven months. She describes the process in this way:

> I looked at the *Akbarnama*. This took me about six months to read, to get clues to Jahangir's personality and character. Then after I had completed the research I reduced all the information into the equivalent of three comic book scripts. Then I had to reduce that down to thirty-two pages![34]

For Ms. Chandrakant, a good script is one that has a good story, follows a chronological order, and has some positive value to impart. Ultimately, she feels, "it should arouse the curiosity of the reader enough to make her or him want to delve into the originals."[35] In order to enable the reader to more easily turn to those "original sources" – as well as to stress the authenticity of the comic books – a short introduction to each issue, the majority of which were written by the late Purushottam Nedungadi, was placed just inside the front cover, and told the reader who the hero or heroine was and what sources his or her story was drawn from. The introduction to the historical *Jahangir* issue referred to above, for instance, begins in this way: "It is tough to be a famous junior, and more so when the senior happens to be Akbar, the Mughal-e-Azam. This was the tragedy of Jahangir" and ends in this way: "The events described here are based on the memoirs

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[33] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.
[34] Kamala Chandrakant, ibid.
[35] Kamala Chandrakant, ibid.

of Akbar and Jahangir and other historical records."[36] Similarly, the introduction to the mythological issue *Tales of Durga* (no. 176, 1978) states that this "Amar Chitra Katha is based on the Durga-Saptashati of the Markandeya Purana."[37]

Once the research and writing are complete, the story is submitted to the editors at the *Amar Chitra Katha* studio. Next, the editorial staff scripts the story. This involves deleting any excess verbiage, dividing the text into sequential panels, and clearly marking the narrative text and the dialogue balloons. The editor must also transform lengthy descriptive statements into visual instructions for the artist, specifying what the artist should depict in each panel. According to M.L. Mitra, to be a good scriptwriter you must learn to visualize everything that you write:

> You must tell the artist what you visualize. Sometimes artists themselves may decide, if they have read the original story, but it is always better for the scriptwriter to direct the visuals as well. The scriptwriter should edit the whole thing too; you must tell the artist the appropriate details – for instance, the right dress, architecture, that sort of thing.[38]

The *Durgesh Nandini* (no. 294, 1983) issue, for instance, is an abridged version of Bankimchandra Chatterjee's novel of the same name. After the comic book story was written by Debrani Mitra and Meera Ugra, M.L. Mitra then scripted it in the comic book format, dividing the story into panels **[Fig. 1.5]**. Here the narrative and the dialogue are clearly delineated, the former appearing in a box at the top of each panel and the latter appearing in balloons in the middle of the panels. The visual instructions are also provided, directing the artist to depict a twenty-five-year-old Rajput man on horseback in the countryside in the first panel, dark clouds gathering in the second panel, and the profile of the Rajput in the third panel. When I spoke with M.L. Mitra, he told me that there are three things that must be understood about scriptwriting:

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[36] *Jahangir*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 221 (Bombay: India Book House, 1980), inside front cover.
[37] *Tales of Durga*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 176 (Bombay: India Book House, 1978), inside front cover.
[38] M.L. Mitra, interviewed by the author in Navi Mumbai, January 15, 2002.

> The first thing, there can't be too much description – only speech and thought balloons. The second thing, there is a thirty-two-page limit; you must limit the story to that. The third thing, you must make the story suitable for children; that is, you must think you are a child while you are writing. I used to write the scripts for my own children. They were quite young then, so I would read the stories to them, see where they got confused, and change it.[39]

After the script is complete, it is given to the artist, who first does a pencil dummy and then inks the panels. The editorial department proofs both the dummy and the inking, and requests any necessary corrections. At this point in the process Kamala Chandrakant would compare the visuals with the text, making sure the words and images flowed together:

> Often when I was editing scripts from the outside – that is, freelance scripts – I would have to take one frame and make it into three frames, or vice-versa. Many freelance writers try to make the comic book panel into an illustrated text. This should be avoided for the most part. You see, the narration panel tells one thing, while the balloons or dialogue carry the story forward. The ideal is to pack as much into the panel as possible.[40]

The final *Durgesh Nandini* comic book evidences some of the editorial and artistic changes that were made during the production process **[Fig. 1.6]**. The first page has been split into five panels, rather than the four that were originally called for in the script. In the process, the text in the panels of the script has been significantly reduced in the final version. For instance, the narrative text in the second panel of the script has been completely deleted, as it was redundant after the image was created: the reader need not be told that the Rajput figure's pace was slow or that he was pondering his mission, for this is now self-evident from the image and the thought balloons.

Artists, of course, have their own opinions on the production process. Artist Savio Mascarenes, for instance, feels that some scripts are better than others:

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[39] M.L. Mitra and Debrani Mitra, interviewed by the author in Navi Mumbai, January 15, 2002. My thanks to them for providing me with a copy of this script.

[40] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.

> I always like the scripts that [name of a particular author] writes. I ask to work on those scripts. They are the best, because she gives just the minimum visual instructions. So I can be much more creative with those scripts. Also, if I have a good rapport with the scriptwriter… then I can be innovative and approach her with suggestions. But it all depends on the author-artist relationship.[41]

Priya Khanna, a member of the editorial staff, agreed with Savio that the best stories happen when the author and artist have a good relationship, but noted that due to the freelance set-up of much of the writing and illustration, this level of communication is rare.[42]

After the synchronization of text and image has been achieved and the dialogue altered as needed, the comic book next moves on to the letterer, who inks in the final text. Next the comic book returns to the editorial department for proofing. Once approved, it is photocopied and reduced to 8-1/2" x 11" standard size, and is then hand-colored. When the editor has okayed the color selections, the comic book is sent to Mr. Pai for his final approval. Next, the comic book is manually prepared for a version of the four-color process that allows the printing of twenty-six specific colors. Finally, a black and white negative is prepared and sent to the printer along with a color guide. The whole process is still manual, due to the prohibitive cost of computerizing it.[43] Although the first issues took many months to create, after the process was streamlined the majority of the comic books were produced in just one month.

MARKETING *AMAR CHITRA KATHA*

Originally, the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series was conceived of as children's literature. Early ads targeted school-age readers, telling them to "prepare for

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[41] Savio Mascarenes and Priya Khanna, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, February 20, 2002.
[42] Savio Mascarenes and Priya Khanna, ibid.
[43] Savio Mascarenes and Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, October 8, 2001. During the writing of this dissertation, the studio has been purchasing computers here and there, with the idea of eventually upgrading to a more computerized process.

the summer holidays" by buying new comic book issues. However, the producers of *Amar Chitra Katha* quickly realized the potential in marketing their comic books to adults. Kamala Chandrakant recalls:

> I was bent on making *ACK* family reading. … I knew that in those days children read what adults chose for them and any decent, well-produced reading material that appealed to parents and grandparents would reach the children. Besides, there were many adults who had never come across the stories gleaned from dusty, crumbling, literal translations which made tedious reading unless one was a researcher! Any good story, well told, would appeal to all age groups was my firm belief and it proved true![44]

Subba Rao also saw the potential in targeting a larger readership, and maintained that even though the primary readership was children, "every adult has a child in him. Also, many of these stories missed out by an adult are read by him."[45]

Working to overcome parents' resistance to the comic book medium, *Amar Chitra Katha* producers began to actively market their series to parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. One clever full-page ad that ran in these comics in the 1970s reverses the traditional grandparent-grandchild relationship by suggesting that a child who reads these comic books will be able to tell his grandmother bedtime stories from the *Mahābhārata*, rather than vice-versa. Another ad from the mid-1970s suggests that *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books are the ideal birthday present for girls and boys alike. But the producers also recognized that in order to sell these comic books to more parents, they would have to overcome the common prejudice that comics were intellectually inferior products that at best were a waste of time and money and at worst could seriously hamper a child's education and intellectual development. Therefore, the producers decided to work to market their product to educators.

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[44] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.
[45] Subba Rao, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 2, 2002.

In February of 1978, a seminar on "The Role of Chitra Katha in School Education" was held. Organized by India Book House, the publishing company of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series, the seminar was intended to assuage common fears about comic books. Many school principals attended, and the Union Minister of Education, Dr. Pratap Chandra Chunder, was the chief guest. In his inaugural address, Dr. Chunder dismissed the notion that comic books were a Western medium by pointing out India's long history of the combined use of text and image to tell stories. Referring to the Ajanta murals with their verses, illuminated manuscripts, and scroll paintings, he explained that "chitra kathas" (picture stories) were indeed a truly Indian medium and could be used to disseminate Indian culture. The *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, in particular, he felt should be used in schools because "there are biographies of great men from different parts of the country; there are tales from Sanskrit; classics and folktales of various regions – all of which could help in promoting national integration."[46] In his preliminary remarks, Baldev Mahajan, the Acting Commissioner of the prestigious Kendriya Vidyalaya Sanghatan school in New Delhi, seconded Dr. Chunder's comments by noting that because the term "comics" has come to acquire a foreign and derogatory meaning, "chitra katha" is a more comprehensive and culturally appropriate term that should therefore be applied to this literature.[47]

Anant Pai next addressed the crowd, trying to persuade the teachers gathered there that comic books – or "chitra kathas" – could indeed be useful educational tools. Defining a comic or a chitra katha as "a series of pictures, telling a story, developing a situation, or presenting the same character in varied circumstances," he argued that it is a medium that captures children's interest by combining visual images with the world of

[46] "The Role of Chitra Katha in School Education" (Bombay: India Book House Education Trust, 1978), 2.
[47] "The Role of Chitra Katha in School Education," ibid.

words.[48] He then responded to six of the most popular fears about comic books. To the fear that children who read comic books will ignore their studies, he argued that instead the appeal of comic books should be harnessed and used to promote intellectual growth. To the fear that excessive comic reading will continue later in life to the detriment of the child, he replied that reading comics provides scope for the development of the imagination and should be encouraged while the child is still young. To the third fear, that comic books provide too much exposure to violence, Anant Pai reassured the audience that he would guard against such exposure. To the fear that a child who reads comics will lose interest in literature, he replied that a penchant for reading comics encourages a love of other books as well. To the fifth fear, that a child's imagination will become overactive from reading comics, he argued that comics positively fire a child's imagination while simultaneously providing an emotional release. Finally, to the fear that children acquire prejudiced values by imitating comic book heroes, he argued that he ensures that only those people are depicted as heroes in his comic book series who cherish the values that sustain society, while those who repudiate those values are depicted as villains.[49] Anant Pai concluded his speech with the following plea: "If there are bad comics, let us oppose them as we oppose bad books or bad movies, but let us not frown on comics as a medium of education."[50]

Additional speeches were given by M.C. Joshi, Superintending Archaeologist of the Archaeological Survey of India, on "Chitra Katha Through the Ages"; by V.P. Dwivedi, the Assistant Keeper of the National Museum in New Delhi, on "The Role of Chitra Katha in Promoting Cultural Awareness"; by Subba Rao, former teacher and associate editor of *Amar Chitra Katha*, on "The Use of Chitra Katha in Teaching

[48] "The Role of Chitra Katha in School Education," ibid., 3.
[49] "The Role of Chitra Katha in School Education," ibid., 3-4.
[50] "The Role of Chitra Katha in School Education," ibid., 4.

History"; and Dr. K.R. Mitra, Language Officer of the Kendriya Vidyalaya Sanghatan, on "Language Development Through the Ages." But what was perhaps most persuasive to the assembled teachers was the discussion of a recent experiment in teaching history and the printed write-up, "An Experiment in Teaching History," that was passed out to all present. In this experiment, thirty schools in New Delhi split their Class VII and VIII history students into two groups. The first group read an *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book on a historical figure; the second read the standard textbook. Those who read the comic book, it was reported (complete with official-looking graphs and charts), not only received higher marks, but also thoroughly enjoyed learning the lesson.[51]

After the seminar had concluded and the results of this experiment were publicized, comic book sales soared as schools across the nation ordered them for their libraries and classrooms. Now advertised as "the only comics welcomed in schools," "endorsed by educationists," and "the route to your roots," the scholarly accuracy and "Indianness" of these comic books was highlighted in an effort to appeal to more parents and educators, and also to potential advertisers. Among the usual "Yippee It's Dipy's!" and "Campa Cola" ads, new ads began to appear at the close of the 1970s, encouraging kids to "put Parle on your school books – and in your lunchbox too!" and to purchase school supplies such as Omega Glory mathematical instruments and Ekco sketch pens.[52]

The producers of *Amar Chitra Katha* decided to translate some of their most popular issues into various regional Indian languages at this time in an effort to capture the non-English-speaking market. Previously, these comics had targeted urban, English-speaking, comfortably middle class children, but Anant Pai and the other producers realized a potential audience existed in the growing number of upwardly mobile families

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[51] "The Role of Chitra Katha in School Education," ibid., 10.

[52] For further information on advertising in this comic book series, see Nandini Chandra, "The Market Life of Amar Chitra Katha," *Seminar*, no. 453 (May 1997), 25-29.

that were striving for middle class status throughout India in the 1970s. Using the original artwork, new lettering was applied in order to make issues like *Krishna* available in Hindi and various other regional languages including Bengali, Malayalam, Kannada, and Assamese according to demand. By the late 1970s the comic books could be found everywhere: in posh urban bookstores and busy streetside stalls, on train station platforms alongside soda and snack vendors, and even at dusty roadside stands in tiny villages. They were also mailed out to subscribers – to individuals throughout the country as well as an increasing number of school libraries – who eagerly awaited the arrival of each new comic book.

Seeking to capture younger readers – those eight years old and under who would grow into the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics (which were directed at children between the years of eight and fourteen) – a new comic book called *Tinkle* was created in 1980. Featuring several short, easy-to-read fictive comic stories and a recurring cast of characters in each issue, this monthly comic "from the house of Amar Chitra Katha" has proven to be quite successful. Many of the stories featured in *Tinkle* are written and submitted by the readers, who eagerly await each issue to see if their story will appear. Reena Puri, associate editor of *Tinkle*, reported receiving as many as 6,000 mail entries per month.[53] And, the vast majority of these fans didn't stop reading *Tinkle* when they were old enough to read *Amar Chitra Katha* – they subscribed to both!

Fan clubs sprouted up in the early 1980s, and were noticed and encouraged by the producers, who asked the presidents of such clubs to mail in reports of their members and activities. In no time, the staff at *Amar Chitra Katha* had created an official "Amar Vikas" monthly newsletter that they mailed out to these fan clubs – at no charge, initially, although a small fee was eventually instituted. The newsletters typically featured a short

[53] Reena Puri, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, October 11, 2001.

story with a cover image on the first page. Within the pages various puzzles, word finds, jokes, and quizzes were included alongside several short fiction and non-fiction pieces that were mailed in by loyal readers. On the back cover of the newsletter an "Around Amar-Tinkle Clubs" roundup was featured, which listed the latest activities of the various fan clubs (such as starting a comic book lending library or holding their own quiz contests). Those who wrote in to the newsletter did so with great hopes that their name and story might be published, or that they might win one of the prizes – always comic book issues – that were mailed to the first ten responders who correctly answered the quizzes.[54]

Due to such marketing strategies, sales continued to rise, reaching 50 million copies sold by 1986. Although monthly sales figures are hard to come by, several sources have reported that by the mid-1980s monthly *Amar Chitra Katha* sales had reached "around 60,000 copies in English, 25,000 in Hindi, 8,000 Assamese and 6,000 each in Kannada and Bengali, every month. At the same time, a cheaper, digest-sized Malayalam version, printed as a franchise by the Malayala Manorama group, sold almost 140,000 copies."[55] Additionally, further comic book sales occurred through foreign editions that were printed as joint ventures in such languages as Bahasa, French, Japanese, Serbo-Croat, German, Spanish, and Swahili. Furthermore, sales figures fail to capture the true circulation statistics of these comic books. Comics, like many magazines in developing countries, often reach a larger audience than is realized, as they are usually shared between friends and siblings, borrowed from lending libraries by numerous

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[54] Ajay Sharma reports that by 1985 there were over 200 of these fan clubs, mailing more than 4,000 letters and contributions in to the *ACK* office. Just a couple of years later there were over 450 clubs. See his "Relationship Marketing," *Business Standard* (Feb. 8, 1994), A4. Jubel D'Cruz, the Amar-Vikas newsletter editor, confirmed these figures when I spoke with him at the studio in Mumbai on October 16, 2001.

[55] Vikram Doctor, "The Return of the Mythological Heroes," *Businessworld* (June 7, 1997), 38; see also M. Anand and M. Rajshekhar, "Moral of the Story," *Businessworld* (October 2, 2000), 52.

readers, and even resold in second-hand bazaars. Indeed, I noticed as I browsed second-hand bazaars that used comic books were often purchased by lower-class children for just a rupee apiece, far cheaper than the retail value for new editions.

But by 1991, with the release of *Jawaharlal Nehru* (no. 436, 1991), the sales had dropped so low that the producers of *Amar Chitra Katha* decided to stop creating new comic book issues. Only 24,000 copies of *Jawaharlal Nehru* sold during 1991 – nowhere close to the break-even mark of 40,000 copies.[56] This was disheartening for the comic book producers, especially given the tremendous resources that went into the making of the *Jawaharlal Nehru* issue – it had involved an unprecedented amount of research in order to write the script, and took several years to complete the artwork. Both the author, Margie Sastry, and the artist, Yusuf Bangalorewala, were committed to producing a responsible, authentic biography of the great leader in the comic book format.[57] So what happened during this time, between the mid-1980s and 1991, to cause sales to decline so dramatically? Anant Pai chalks it up to the rising popularity of television:

> [O]verall TV popularity has hurt all print media here, including *Amar Chitra Katha*. You know, we used to sell five lakh [500,000] copies every month. Now we reprint only six to twelve thousand every month. Sales are much lower because of the TV… that is why we stopped making new issues – because sales were down. The youth today is interested in watching TV, in the Internet, in all of this new technology. So they read much less now.[58]

Although Doordarshan, the Indian government-run television network, was first introduced in 1959, it was not until the mid-1980s that it reached into the average home. As Purnima Mankekar notes, the mid-1980s and early 1990s witnessed "a dramatic expansion of television in different parts of India, with the number of transmitters

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[56] Vikram Doctor, "The Return of the Mythological Heroes," op. cit., 38.

[57] Margie Sastry, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, January 11, 2002; Yusuf Bangalorewala, written correspondence with the author, April 12, 2002.

[58] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 10, 2002. See also V. Gangadhar, "Story Time with Uncle Pai," *The Free Press Journal* (Dec. 30, 2001), 10.

increasing from 26 in 1982 to 523 in 1991."[59] In 1984, the first entertainment serial was introduced, enthralling the audience, and other tremendously successful serials quickly followed. From January of 1987 to September of 1990, Ramanand Sagar's "Ramayan" serial aired, captivating viewers across the nation in an unprecedented way. Philip Lutgendorf reports that conservative estimates of Doordarshan's daily viewership during this period range from 40 to 60 million, with the most popular episodes being viewed by anywhere from 80 to 100 million people.[60] *Amar Chitra Katha* and Doordarshan were competing for the same audience, and Doordarshan appeared to be winning. Not only was Doordarshan's core target audience the urban middle class, but its regular viewers were women and children – the very audience that had previously been such loyal purchasers of the comic books.[61] One former *Amar Chitra Katha* fan who cancelled his subscription after Doordarshan's arrival expressed strong feelings to me on this matter:

> Uncle Pai lost me as a reader when he introduced his never-ending Mahabharat series. That is when I stopped reading *Amar Chitra Katha* and stopped my subscription too. The best part about *ACK* was the unpredictability of what was coming next! There was Mahabharat on TV and now Mahabharat in *ACK* (that too in excruciating detail). I wish he had never done that. I would have continued to buy *ACK*.[62]

It was not just Anant Pai or the other producers of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books who suffered under the changing market in these years. Comic book series like *Indrajal*, *Parag* (Hindi), *Chandamama*, and *Balarama* (Hindi) all experienced declining sales. Business analyst Ajay Sharma puts it this way: "The eighties were grim for the

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[59] Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 5.

[60] Philip Lutgendorf, "All in the (Raghu) Family: A Video Epic in Cultural Context," in Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 223. See also Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. pages 72-120 and page 326 note 48 for further viewership statistics.

[61] See Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, op. cit., 6.

[62] Anonymous fan 1.1 (U.S.), written correspondence with the author, February 10, 2003.

publishers of children's magazines and comics. The market shrank by 50 per cent every year, and several old favourites had to close shop as the young set got hooked to television."[63] Analysts M. Anand and M. Rajshekhar put forward a similar assessment of the situation in their discussion of *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Chandamama* comics:

> Both magazines [*Chandamama* and *ACK*] reached their zenith in the eighties – boasting of monthly sales of nine lakh and five lakh copies respectively. And then, sales began to slip. It was the nineties, and cable television was pushing print out of fashion. Kids glued to the idiot box hardly had the time or the inclination to read. Many thought that the two magazines would die.[64]

During the 1990s, the producers of *Amar Chitra Katha* made several attempts to recapture the market. In 1994, India Book House decided to re-launch the comic book series by releasing "deluxe editions" of a majority of the earlier titles – those that could be salvaged after a tragic fire destroyed much of the original artwork and negatives. For these deluxe editions the old covers were replaced with new, glossy covers that were made from thicker, laminated paper stock. The old cover artwork was resized to fit within a brightly colored border, and the titles were redone in a brighter, more eye-catching format. Chandrakant Rane, the artist who was responsible for much of these changes, said that he felt that the comics "should call out to children – spark their attention, their interest," and that since the redesign the comics were selling much better.[65] Accompanying the release of these deluxe editions, various release parties were held throughout India over the course of the year. For instance, "Amar Chitra Katha Week" was held in Bangalore from April 23-29 of 1995, featuring fancy dress contests in which children dressed up as their favorite *Amar Chitra Katha* character, coloring contests in which children colored masks of characters from the comic books, and quiz

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[63] Ajay Sharma, "Relationship Marketing," op. cit. See also his related article "The Death of an Old Favourite," *Business Standard* (Feb. 8, 1994), A4.

[64] M. Anand and M. Rajshekhar, "Moral of the Story," op. cit., 52. See also "Recruit New Customers and Retain Brand Identity," *Business Standard* (Nov. 18, 1997), 3-4.

[65] Chandrakant Rane, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, October 25, 2001.

contests presided over by "Uncle" Pai himself.[66] These new deluxe editions also came with a new price tag: the very first comic books had sold for 1.25 rupees apiece; by the late 1970s the price had been raised to 3.50 rupees; in the mid-1980s the price was upped to 10 rupees. The new deluxe edition issues are now sold at a whopping 25 rupees apiece – and are selling well, by all reports.

The producers of *Amar Chitra Katha* also branched out into new media in an effort to recapture the market, beginning with the production of audiocassette recordings of the comic book tales. In association with Bangalore-based Phoenix Global Solutions, they also released CD-ROM versions of the comic books (priced at Rs. 599). In November of 1998, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee paid tribute to the *Amar Chitra Katha* series by holding the *ACK* CD-ROM release party at his residence.[67] In August of 1998, a TV show produced by UTV (Universal Television in Mumbai) and based on the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books began to be aired on Doordarshan-1.[68] Zarina Mehta, Director of UTV, stated that she originally wanted to produce an animated show, but found the cost to be too prohibitive. She therefore decided to create a live-action version of the comic books, using the original scripts as her guide but altering them where necessary:

> In the television medium, the first two minutes of a show are very important – that is when you must hook the audience. The *ACK*s can be very slow in the beginning. We would never start with a "once upon a time" slow sort of opening. We started with a big event, with action, to lure the children in. The rest of the story and the endings we often told in the same way as they were told in the comics, but it was important to change the beginning. … In some cases the comic book just isn't long enough for a half-hour TV episode. And in some cases it is

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[66] Kavitha K., "Comic Release," *Deccan Herald* (May 20, 1995), page 1 of the "Open Sesame" insert.

[67] See "Amarchitra Katha Goes Digital," *Organiser* (Nov. 29, 1998), 18; also V. Gangadhar, "Story Time with Uncle Pai," op. cit.; and "Uncle Pai's Fun-Filled Stories Launched on Cds, Cassettes," *Afternoon Dispatch & Courier* (Mumbai, Dec. 19, 2001), 8.

[68] See Kushalrani Gulab, "Illustrated History of India," *Asian Age* (Sept. 13, 1998), 23; Surekha Kadapa-Bose, "Uncle Pai's Classics," *The Week* (Sept. 13, 1998), 46; Vikram Doctor, "The Return of the Mythological Heroes," op. cit., 38.

> just boring for many pages at a time. So we must make the script more entertaining, speed up the pace, emphasize the action and the emotion.[69]

In creating episodes like "Ganesh," "Krishna," "Shakuntala," and "Tansen," the costume and set designers also relied on the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books. Indeed, these comic books have been very influential in this regard, causing a "certain homogenization" in Philip Lutgendorf's terms, who notes that "visually speaking, the characters and settings of the Sagar serial look much like those of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books…"[70] Zarina Mehta explained that the Sagars, who produced the "Ramayan" TV serial, and the Chopras, who produced the "Mahabharat" TV serial, each co-produced some of the *ACK* TV episodes, furthering the homogenization. When asked why she chose to create this TV series based on the popular comic books, Ms. Mehta replied:

> The comics taught me a lot. I read them all when I was younger, and they inspired me to learn more about these things. In fact, I still have all of them somewhere around here. The comics were quite popular with many Indian children when I was growing up, Hindus and also non-Hindus, like me [Ms. Mehta is a Parsi]. They are the reason that we know India's mythology, the reason we can visualize it and remember it. So we thought a TV serial based on these comics could help bring India's history and mythology to a new generation. And I really enjoyed producing the show. It was great fun.[71]

The producers of *Amar Chitra Katha* have tried a variety of other tactics, as well, to keep their product in circulation. Although new titles officially ceased being written in 1991, when India Book House decided to focus on reprinting previous best sellers, a few new *Amar Chitra Katha* issues have nonetheless occasionally been released. "Bumper Issue" comic books, which typically range from 72 to 96 pages in length (rather than the standard 32), began to be released in 1992, beginning with *Valmiki's Ramayana* (no. 10,001). Some of these comics were reprints of earlier special issues that were now

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[69] Zarina Mehta, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 11, 2002. My thanks to Ms. Mehta for sharing some of the episodes with me.

[70] Philip Lutgendorf, "All in the (Raghu) Family," op. cit., 246.

[71] Zarina Mehta, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 11, 2002.

being reissued in the new "deluxe edition" format with new covers, such as *Dasha Avatar* (no. 10,002) and *Jesus Christ* (no. 10,003); others were completely new creations, like *Valmiki's Ramayana*; while still others combined three earlier issues under one new cover, such as *Tales from the Panchatantra* (no. 10,004) and *Tales from the Jatakas* (no. 10,005). One of the most popular bumper issues was released in August of 1997, when India was celebrating its fiftieth year of independence: *The Story of the Freedom Struggle* (bumper issue no. 10). This seventy-two-page issue begins with the arrival of Western merchants in India, recaps the rise of the British colonial regime and the beginnings of the struggle for independence, and ends with Jawaharlal Nehru hoisting the tricolor Indian flag atop the Red Fort on August 15, 1947. Created by stitching together a few new transitional panels with panels and storylines from several previous issues, especially *March to Freedom I: Birth of the Indian National Congress* (no. 348, 1986), *March to Freedom 2: A Nation Awakes* (no. 356, 1986), and *March to Freedom 3: Saga of Indian Revolutionaries* (no. 360, 1986), this bumper issue received a tremendous sales boost when Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee agreed to officially release it as part of the nation's ceremonies. As one school principal in Mumbai told me, this comic book is now regularly used as a part of their curriculum:

> In fact, we have made the *Amar Chitra Katha Freedom Struggle* [bumper issue no. 10, 1997] comic book compulsory reading for the ninth standard. In the tenth standard they have to do a paper on the Freedom Struggle, so this gives them some background, some ability to visualize the important figures ahead of time. And it is not as heavy as the textbooks they will have to read in tenth standard for their exams and their papers. And we give *Amar Chitra Kathas* out as awards to our students at various functions.[72]

In addition to Prime Minister Vajpayee, several other eminent Indian figures have released *Amar Chitra Katha* titles. These public releases have been carefully organized to perpetuate the image of unity in diversity, of an India to which Hindus, Muslims,

[72] Anonymous principal 1.1, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 9, 2002.

Sikhs, and Christians of a variety of regional, caste, and class backgrounds all belong: Dr. Rafiq Zakaria released *Sultana Razia* (no. 110, 1976); Swami Chinmayananda released *The Gita* (no. 127, 1977); Cardinal Simon Pimenta released *Jesus Christ* (no. 10,003); Sheikh Abdullah, former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, released the Urdu translation of *Akbar* (no. 200, 1979); Darbara Singh, former Chief Minister of the Punjab, released *Bhagat Singh* (no. 234, 1981); Buta Singh, a Dalit activist, released *Chokha Mela* (no. 292, 1983); Giani Zail Singh, former President of India, released *Mahamati Prannath* (no. 296, 1983); and in August of 2000, Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi, the Union Human Resource Development Minister, released the new bumper issue *Bhagwat: The Krishna Avatar* (2000). Elected officials' participation in these public release ceremonies over the years and their endorsements of the comic books' educational value not only greatly boost sales of these comic books, but also maintain the unofficial relationship that exists between *Amar Chitra Katha* and the state, ensuring that the producers of these comics continue to release titles that promote state values, including the discourse of national integration.[73]

Other special releases have included a 14-volume *Mahabharata* set, which was released in 1989 and was so popular, despite its high price of Rs. 980 (70 rupees for each 32-page volume), that the initial press run sold out immediately and anxious fans wrote in to the publisher to request that their names be placed on a waiting list for the next press run.[74] "Pancharatna" (five gems) issues, which are hardbound collections of five similarly themed single issues, have also proven popular, especially as gift items. Finally, a few commissioned *Amar Chitra Katha* issues have recently been released. The first such issue was *G.D. Birla* (no. 382, 1987), which was commissioned by the Birla

[73] For a criticism of this marketing strategy as concealing "a grand plan of exclusion," see Nandini Chandra, "The Market Life of Amar Chitra Katha," op. cit., 26.
[74] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 2, 2002.

Foundation. *Swami Pranavananda* (no. 679, 1998), another commissioned issue, was sponsored by Bharat Sevashram Sangha, the organization that was founded by Swami Pranavananda. In 2001, while I was conducting my field research, another commissioned issue was released: *Swami Chinmayananda* (no. 732, 2001), sponsored by the Chinmaya Mission. Breaking with the standard narrative formula, this issue does not present Swami Chinmayananda, founder of the Chinmaya Mission, as a "hero" in the typical comic book fashion. Rather, it provides a biographical account of this Hindu spiritual leader's life from a follower's perspective. The cover art also breaks with the standard formula, featuring a photograph of the Swami. But the producers had no fear that such changes to the successful narrative and visual format would harm sales, for the sales are guaranteed for such commissioned issues. The author of this issue, Margie Sastry, explains that those who commission the issue "pick up the tab, and they also pick up the copies… they have a guaranteed number which they buy and which they distribute. So in that sense the cost, the burden is less on the publisher."[75] Not surprisingly, those who commission a particular comic book and guarantee to purchase a set number of copies have some editorial control. Whereas a majority of the comic books were produced within thirty days by the time the process had been streamlined in the 1980s, this issue was several years in the making. Ms. Sastry explained that those who commissioned the issue also reviewed the script and the artwork, which "makes the process a little longer, and a little more convoluted… everybody had some say, you know, they had pictures or they remembered some detail. So it went through a lot of drafts."[76] Discussing the *G.D. Birla* issue, author Yagya Sharma described how the script of this commissioned issue differed from the usual format:

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[75] Margie Sastry, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, January 11, 2002.
[76] Margie Sastry, ibid.

> We didn't try to build Birla into more than what he was. He was a great industrialist, a very important man in that way. But … for a hero it takes conflict to carry the story forward. There must be a conflict, a climax, and then some sort of resolution that features the hero in a positive light. … We did not try to do this sort of a story with Birla… it is a biography about his life, it is meant to educate.[77]

The fact that these individuals or the organizations founded by them sought to have an *Amar Chitra Katha* title written in their honor is a sign of the tremendous success that this comic book series has attained. It is also a sign that the canon of Indian "heroes" featured in this comic book series is not closed; that entry into this canon can be attained by those who can afford it. Discussing the *Swami Chinmayananda* issue, Anant Pai recalled Swami Chinmayananda's fondness for the comic book series: "Swami Chinmayananda always spoke about 'teaching Hinduism to Hindus.' And for that reason he was a great fan of *ACK*. He wrote the introduction to *The Gita* issue [no. 127, 1977], and from this time on he had the desire for an issue on himself."[78] So far, the *Swami Chinmayananda* issue has sold well: four months after the initial press run of 30,000 issues, a second, non-sponsored run was being printed.[79]

Most recently, the producers of *Amar Chitra Katha* have realized the value of the Internet in marketing their comic books to a whole new audience, and in conjunction with the release of their new website in 2004, they decided to go back into a limited production schedule for new issues. The website (www.amarchitrakatha.com) features a brief history of *Amar Chitra Katha* and an introduction to Anant Pai, as well as a catalogue of available deluxe edition reprints and a shopping-cart system for online purchases that can be shipped domestically within India or abroad. With this website, the comics are now easily available to a global market. Along with the release of the new website, the release of a new issue was also celebrated: *JRD Tata: The Quiet Conqueror*

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[77] Yagya Sharma, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 16, 2002.
[78] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, December 5, 2001.
[79] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 2, 2002.

(no. 735, 2004), about one of India's leading industrialists, Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata. An issue based on the sixteenth-century Hindi *Rāmacaritmānas* by Tulsidas is scheduled as the next new release, due sometime in 2005.

A sure sign of the success of this comic book series is the competition that it has inspired. The Delhi-based *Chitra Kathayain* comic book series published by Rohan Book Company, for instance, has much in common with the *Amar Chitra Katha* series. Founded in 2000, the *Chitra Kathayain* series features many of the same mythological titles, including *Rama* (2001), *Shakuntala* (2000), and *Durga* (2000), as well as historical titles like *Shivaji* (2001), *Rana Pratap* (2001), and *Babasaheb Ambedkar* (2001). Although the style of the artwork is very different, the script and panel arrangement of this newer comic book series is clearly modeled on that of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, as can be easily seen when one compares issues by these two companies side by side. Other comic books, such as the *Gaurav Gatha* series published by Gaurav Gatha Publications in New Delhi and the Jain series *Diwakar Chitra Katha* published by Mahavir Seva Trust in Bombay (founded in 1995), also have been inspired by the format and contents of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics[80] – but none of these series has been able to capture the larger market of *Amar Chitra Katha*, or that market's loyalty to the comic book series.

THE 'ROUTE TO YOUR ROOTS'

Perhaps the most important sign of the success of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series is the loyalty of its readership. During my time at the comic book studio, parents and grandparents who had either read these comics as children or read them to

[80] Dr. Shobha Shah of the Mahavir Seva Trust states that the "format and presentation" of the *Diwarkar Chitra Katha* series "is inspired by Amar Chitra Katha," although the content and layout is determined by the Diwarkar Prakashan office in Agra. Dr. Shah, written correspondence with the author, February 15, 2002.

their children regularly stopped in to purchase every available title to pass them on to the next generation. A majority of the now-adult fans of these comics that I interviewed described to me the great anticipation with which they awaited the arrival of each new issue as children. Many also reported that their mothers would bind their issues together in hard covers to protect and preserve them. And many, many of these fans still have their comic book collections somewhere – in their attics, in their parents' homes, or on their own children's bookshelves. Such careful preservation and unwillingness to let go of these childhood collections indicates the sentimental attachment that readers of these comic books still have for them. This attachment is best expressed in the brief letter that one woman in Pune wrote to Anant Pai: "Recently my husband's uncle passed away. He has donated his entire collection of 'Amar Chitra Katha' to his niece in his will. Doesn't it prove what a treasure they are? Thank God for giving you this brilliant idea."[81] Many of the fans I interviewed in India and abroad even generously offered to share their beloved comic book collections with me, as did this fan, originally from Bombay but now living in the U.S., who contacted me after learning about my research:

> I am a huge *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Tinkle* fan. I grew up on them and used to pride myself on my near perfect collection. I am not exactly sure why I am writing to you, maybe out of sheer excitement that there is someone else out there who finds those comics as interesting as I do. … In case you are looking for some issues, I think I still have all my comics at my apt [apartment] in Bombay. … That's unless my mum has already thrown them. She could not handle the sheer volume of my comics, you know how small apartments are in Bombay.[82]

Now known as "Uncle Pai" to children and adult fans throughout India and beyond, Anant Pai's vision has clearly struck a chord, and his comic books appear well on their way to achieving an immortal presence as each generation of fans passes their love for them down to the next generation. Indeed, many twenty- and thirty-something-year-old

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[81] Anonymous fan 1.2 (India), letter to Anant Pai, Fall 2001.

[82] Anonymous fan 1.3 (U.S.), written correspondence with the author, February 6, 2003.

fans in urban Indian cities and abroad reported that these comic books "were the lifeline of [their] generation," as one 25-year-old man from Hyderabad put it, and that without them they would not know much about the history and culture of India.[83] A 31-year-old man born in India but now residing in the U.S. expressed very similar sentiments: "My appreciation of the rich and glorious history and tradition of India and Hinduism has been bolstered primarily by *ACK* comics, I am sure many others of my generation feel the same."[84] It is remarkable how many comic book readers view *Amar Chitra Katha* comics not merely as entertaining reading, but as an authoritative source on Hindu and Indian culture; as, indeed, a route to their roots.

But whose roots do these comic book issues really provide a route to? Certainly, they are a window into Anant Pai's own beliefs about what it means to be Hindu/Indian. Yet, as we have seen, at times readers and fellow producers have succeeded in challenging some of those beliefs and in introducing some of their own into the comic book series. Although Anant Pai originally set out to teach Indian children about their own mythology, in the end his readers have also taught him something. With a newfound appreciation for the miraculous in mythological narratives of the Hindu deities, Pai has now reformulated his comic book template, and readily incorporates miracles into new issues. One of the most recent issues produced in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series is the 200-page "bumper issue" called *Bhagawat: The Krishna Avatar* (not numbered, 2000). In this issue, not only does the Yamuna River part for Vasudeva, but he is also escorted by a large hooded serpent that shelters baby Krishna from the water. And when Krishna is shown lifting the Govardhan Mountain, the scale is even grander than it was in the revised *Krishna* edition, so that Krishna is a miniscule figure lifting a magnificent

[83] Anonymous fan 1.4 (India), written correspondence with the author, October 17, 2002.
[84] Anonymous fan 1.5 (U.S.), written correspondence with the author, October 18, 2002.

mountain, one that is so big that its peak extends beyond the panel's frame. Clearly, the comic book series has come a long way since the original *Krishna* edition.

In my opinion, this changing understanding of the god Krishna and his mythology illustrates not only the way in which these comics can act as an arena of debate, but also the boundaries of that debate. For instance, in the ongoing discussions about how to depict Krishna and his story, no one challenged the assumption that *all* Indian children needed to learn Krishna's story. Within the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, Krishna is the implicit head of the Hindu pantheon, with a far greater number of issues devoted to him than to any of the other Hindu gods. This is a reflection of Anant Pai's personal beliefs as a Vaishnava and devotee of Krishna:

> Yes, there are a lot of [comic] books on Krishna especially. You see, he is the most popular god in India – in the north and the south, everywhere. Even the Chief Minister of Kerala, he is against religion, an atheist, but even he goes to a Krishna temple on important days. And there is a Muslim poet in Karnataka, he is still living today, Nissar Ahmed, who has written many poems to Krishna. Beautiful poems. And in Bengal roadside singers sing Krishna's glory from village to village. Their songs are called "baul" songs. Krishna is the god of all of India.[85]

But the prevalence of Krishna-themed comics in this series also reflects the active positioning of Vashnavism as the dominant form of Hinduism within modern India.[86] Furthermore, the occasional titles on Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and even Christian religious figures are greatly outnumbered by the large quantity of titles about the exploits of Hindu deities, which again reflects not only the founder's personal beliefs

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[85] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 17, 2002.

[86] On the subject of Vaishnavism as the dominant trend within Hinduism, see Vasudha Dalmia's works: Vasudha Dalmia, " 'The Only Real Religion of the Hindus': Vaisnava Self-representation in the Late Nineteenth Century," in V. Dalmia and H. von Stietencron, eds., *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), 176-210; and Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harischandra and Nineteenth-century Banaras* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

as a Hindu, but also the positioning of Hinduism as the dominant religion of modern India.

As we will see in following chapters, the historical comic book titles have similarly acted as a locus for debate about which historical figures deserve to be commemorated as Indian "heroes," while simultaneously demonstrating the parameters of that debate. According to Anant Pai, these historical "comics dealing with regional personalities were started to promote national integration. … I wanted people in one region of the country to know more about the culture, history and ways of life of people in another."[87] In accord with this goal, issues have been created featuring an array of historical characters from the various regions of India. Yet this image of unity in diversity has also been tempered by the dominant, state-sponsored emphasis on integration entailing a pan-Indian identity that unites Indians together across space and time in the effort to defeat national enemies and defend the homeland.

[87] Cited in V. Gangadhar, "Anant Pai and His *Amar Chitra Kathas*," op. cit., 140.

Chapter 2: Sequencing Durga: Creating "Authentic" Tales in *Amar Chitra Katha*

In the mid-1970s, when Anant Pai had his epiphany and realized that many readers looked to the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books as a "legitimate source" of sacred stories, he began to feel more of a sense of responsibility towards textual authority.[1] At this time he decided to revise his comic book template in order to make the comic books more "accurate" and "authentic." As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the major changes made at this time was the depiction of miracles: whereas Anant Pai had previously avoided them and considered them unscientific, he now embraced them:

> For example, the *Tales of Durga* issue, it is based on the *Devī Māhātmya*. … In the story Durga shoots her arrows at the demon Mahisha Asura, and from every drop of blood that the demon sheds a new demon arises. This has a symbolic meaning: it means that you can't cure violence with violence. But if I changed the story because it is not scientific, then these symbolic meanings are also altered. … All of the mythological stories have symbolic meanings that are changed if you change the story. So we must tell these stories accurately, without changes.[2]

But is it actually possible to tell Durga's story and other mythological stories "accurately" in the comic book medium? Anant Pai and his team of associate editors strongly believe that it is possible. For Anant Pai, Margie Sastry, Kamala Chandrakant, and the other editors of these comic books, the value of this series is tied directly to its accuracy and authenticity. They insist that in their recastings of "original" sources no symbolic meanings have been altered, no new interpolations have been inserted, and no facts have been left unchecked. Parents, educators, students, and other consumers can therefore rest assured that when they purchase and read these comic books, they are

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[1] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 17, 2002. For a discussion of this epiphany, see Chapter 1.

[2] Anant Pai, ibid.

reading the real thing, only better – the "original" Indian source, now in a fun, short, visual format.

Furthermore, they insist that these comic book renderings of classical mythological narratives are not just for Hindus, but are for all Indians. Former associate editor Kamala Chandrakant explained her thoughts on the "Indianness" of these mythological comics in this way:

> In scripting the *ACK*s and editing or rewriting them, I made conscious attempts to keep out narrow religious bigotry and bring out the essence of the great perceptions captured in the vast body of our Sanskrit-language literature in a manner and a metaphor that would appeal to all thinking Indians, no matter what their religious persuasion. Our great literary heritage belongs to all our countrymen and should appeal to all of them.[3]

In this chapter, I conduct a close examination of the *Tales of Durga* (no. 176, 1978) issue, asking how this comic book relates to classical Sanskrit narratives of the goddess Durga, whether it is possible to authentically render such classical narratives in the comic book format, and if this comic book does indeed appeal to all Indians.

MEDIATING AUTHENTICITY

In the decade following the release of the first *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book, *Krishna* (no. 11, 1969), many more mythological comics featuring various Hindu gods were created: *Rama* (no. 15, 1970), *Hanuman* (no. 19, 1971), *Shiva Parvati* (no. 29, 1972), *Surya* (no. 58, 1974), *Indra and Shachi* (no. 71, 1974), *Ganga* (no. 88, 1975), *Ganesha* (no. 89, 1975), *Sati and Shiva* (no. 111, 1976), *Krishna and Rukmini* (no. 112, 1976), *Garuda* (no. 130, 1977), *Krishna and Jarasandha* (no. 147, 1977), *Tales of Vishnu* (no. 160, 1978), *Tales of Shiva* (no. 164, 1978), *Krishna and Narakasura* (no. 167, 1978), *Indra and Vritra* (no. 170, 1978), and *Krishna and the False Vasudeva* (no. 172, 1978). Throughout the 1970s, Durga was slated on the production charts as one of the Hindu

[3] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.

deities whose story remained to be told. In 1978, Anant Pai decided it was time to assign the *Tales of Durga* title.

Anant Pai chose the author and artist very carefully in making this assignment. He decided that author Subba Rao should write the *Tales of Durga* script. Although Mr. Rao was not a devotee of Durga, Anant Pai considered him a good researcher:

> Subba Rao was a good author. He was a teacher before, so he knew how children read, what they like. And he knew the textbooks, knew history very well. He was also good with mythology. He did a lot of research on his own before writing a script. So some issues he picked out himself. But many I assigned to him, like *Tales of Durga*, because I knew he would do the research, read the original texts, and write a good script.[4]

The artwork for *Tales of Durga* was assigned to Souren Roy, a Hindu Bengali living in Calcutta. Because Bengal is one of the most important regions where the worship of Durga is concentrated, Pai was certain that Mr. Roy was the best artist for the job and would depict the goddess accurately. He explained the logic behind this decision in this way:

> Yes, we give the stories set in Bengal to Souren Roy [in Bengal] because he will know what the fashion is like there, what the buildings are like, etc. And Mohandas Menon [in Kerala] knows these things for Kerala. These are things that not every artist will know. And we have used a Sikh artist for some of our Sikh issues, Devender, because in the past we had errors with the bracelet, with earrings, etc. So it is better that a Sikh artist do these issues, or if that is not possible, that a Sikh like Mr. Rajinder Singh Raj check the story for accuracy before it is printed.[5]

Anant Pai gave the author and artist both explicit instructions not only to retain important miracles as they worked up the comic book script and pencil sketches, but also to remain as faithful as possible to the "original text" in every other way as well.[6] These

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[4] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 8, 2002.

[5] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 17, 2002.

[6] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 8, 2002. For more on Anant Pai's insistence that his comics are truthful and accurate, see John A. Lent, "India's *Amar Chitra Katha*: 'Fictionalized' History or the Real Story?" *International Journal of Comic Art* (Spring 2004), esp. pp. 62-67.

instructions reflected the new emphasis on accuracy and authenticity in the production of the mythological *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books that followed in the wake of Anant Pai's epiphany. Kamala Chandrakant discussed this new emphasis on authenticity and her role in achieving it with me in great detail:

> In the early titles, before I came, Mr. Anant Pai was very particular about authenticity in the visuals: period dress, architecture, that sort of thing. But he was not particular about the text at all. For me the text is more important – it is where credibility comes in. But both are important in the end.[7]

When I asked Kamala to explain this statement further, asking how one makes the text authentic, she mentioned that it was very important to conduct research into the "original" texts, and that she therefore spent a lot of time in libraries:

> More than seventy per cent of the titles in the *ACK* series were born out of the dusty, crumbling volumes, mostly the works of Bengali and European scholars, in the Royal Asiatic Society's library. Of course I did use the library of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, too, but sparingly.[8]

Kamala went on by describing her typical day to me, emphasizing the amount of work she conducted in the library during the fifteen years that she worked for *Amar Chitra Katha*:

> For most of fifteen years my day began at 4:30 a.m. and went on well past midnight. I had three small children to bathe, dress, and pack off to school along with lunchboxes before 8:00 a.m. From 9:30 to 1:00 p.m. I did most of the work that involved my presence in the office. Form 2:00 p.m. to 7:00 I was at the Asiatic Library reading and thereafter till 8 p.m. at the Bhavan's Library. I got home, gave the children dinner, put them to bed and read for a script or wrote my own script till 11:30 p.m.[9]

Additionally, she noted, she furthered the authenticity of the series by introducing the introductions inside the front cover of the comic books:

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[7] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.
[8] Kamala Chandrakant, ibid.
[9] Kamala Chandrakant, ibid.

> One of the other things I introduced was the introductions. My aim was that one day the readers of *ACK* would want to read the more elaborate originals and would like to know where the *ACK* was drawn from. The late Mr. Purushuttam Nedungadi wrote most of the introductions for *ACK*. By now *ACK* had gained the acceptance and approval of schools and parents. Children loved them, the family enjoyed them. I was achieving all I had set out to achieve. *ACK*s were not brushed aside as mere comics but had achieved a standing and were even being used as authentic reference material by many.[10]

Margie Sastry, an author and associate editor who joined the company shortly after Anant Pai's realization about the importance of textual authority, similarly maintains that preserving the authenticity of the "original" source was a top priority with all of the mythological issues. When asked whether she had any flexibility to update a script and make it more relevant for modern times, she replied:

> Not at all. If it's from a mythological title, not at all. Because it is supposed to be based on a certain source. So you have to be true to that. And that, I think, has been the staying power of *Amar Chitra Katha*. You don't make it relevant to modern times. And I would say, even the language is a little archaic in the mythological titles. … Not only the language style, but also the content is true to the original. You don't play around with mythology. But if it's lighter, like a story or a folktale, you have a lot of play. You can change it, you can add to it, you can put flourishes – whatever you like, that's fine.[11]

But how does one put this guiding philosophy into actual practice? For instance, which version of the "original" text is the scriptwriter to be true to? For Durga, as for all Hindu deities, there are a number of Sanskrit texts that relate her mythology, including the *Devī Māhātmya* and the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. When asked about the possibility of multiple "original" or classical Sanskrit mythological texts, Anant Pai's response was simple: "If there are three-four texts, then I choose one, and list the source in the comic book."[12] For the *Tales of Durga* issue, he explained, the *Devī Māhātmya* was chosen as the guiding text because it is the oldest – and therefore in his opinion the most authentic –

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[10] Kamala Chandrakant, ibid.
[11] Margie Sastry, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, January 11, 2002.
[12] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 17, 2002.

source on Durga. And indeed, written inside the front cover of the *Tales of Durga* comic book is the claim that this issue is "based on the Durga-Saptashati of the Markandeya Purana."[13] Consisting of three short stories that claim to be drawn from the *Devī Māhātmya* or "Glorification of the Goddess" – that is, the 81st to 93rd chapters of the circa sixth-century Sanskrit *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (also known as the *Durgā Saptaśatī* or "Seven Hundred Verses to Durga") – this comic book issue recaps some of the episodes about the goddess Durga that are told in these chapters of the classical *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*.[14]

The *Devī Māhātmya* is a philosophical treatise on the nature of the Great Goddess as the ultimate reality of the universe. To cite Thomas Coburn, who has translated and analyzed this text, the *Devī Māhātmya* is the earliest text "in which the object of worship is conceptualized as Goddess, with a capital *G*."[15] Whereas previous Purāṇic stories had equated male gods like Krishna, Vishnu, and Shiva with the ultimate reality, the *Devī Māhātmya* was the first text to make the case for the Great Goddess as the ultimate reality by reworking old myths and canonizing new ones. The *Devī Māhātmya* begins with a frame story in which a king and a merchant ask a sage, Medhas, about the nature of their woes, for the king has lost his kingdom and the merchant has been banished by his own family. Sage Medhas replies that it is the Goddess who is responsible both for deluding them and for the eternal knowledge that can bring them liberation. He then goes on to

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[13] *Tales of Durga, Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 176 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1978), inside front cover.

[14] On the dating of the *Devī Māhātmya*, see D.R. Bhandarkar, "Epigraphic Notes and Questions," *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 23 (1909), 73-74; Thomas B. Coburn, *Devī-Māhātmya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), esp. pp. 1 and 63; and Thomas B. Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devī-Māhātmya and a Study of its Interpretation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), esp. pp. 13-27 and 87-93. Also, Pratapaditya Pal notes that the earliest extant manuscript of the *Devī Māhātmya* dates to the tenth century, and is now preserved in the National Library in Kathmandu. See his "Early Paintings of the Goddess in Nepal," *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 12 (1981), p. 41 and note 1.

[15] Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, op. cit., 16.

narrate three stories of this Goddess, so that his audience can begin down the path of liberation through knowledge of and devotion to the Goddess.

In the first story, the god Vishnu lies sleeping on his serpent in the universal ocean during the interval between the cyclical creation and destruction of the universe. As Brahma prepares to create the next cycle of the universe, two demons – Madhu and Kaitabha – arise from the dirt in Vishnu's ear and set out to slay Brahma. Brahma decides to awaken Vishnu, so that Vishnu may kill the two demons, and to do so Brahma sings a hymn to Goddess Mahamaya ("She Who is the Great Illusion"), here personified as the force that keeps Vishnu from awakening. After praising the Goddess and her cosmic forms, Brahma asks her to withdraw from Vishnu so that he may arise and destroy the demons. The Goddess consents to this request, and Vishnu then awakens and decapitates Madhu and Kaitabha. As Coburn has demonstrated so well, this is a familiar story that has been cleverly refashioned here: "[T]he story has previously been 'owned' by Vishnu, for all previous accounts portray him as the agent of the Asuras' demise. Now, in our text, Vishnu's very capacity to act as agent is shown to be derivative, contingent upon the withdrawal from him of the Goddess..."[16] Here it is instead claimed that it is the Goddess, not the gods Vishnu or Brahma, who is ultimately responsible for the death of the demons and the creation of the world.

The second story in the *Devī Māhātmya* is the most popular story about Durga, one that I will discuss in more detail in the following pages, in which the Goddess battles and defeats the buffalo demon Mahisha. This story, according to Coburn, has few earlier precedents, and functions to "demonstrate not only that the Goddess has an earthly career, but that of earthly creatures, she is the supreme ruler."[17] Thus whereas the first

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[16] Thomas Coburn, *Devī-Māhātmya*, op. cit., 221.

[17] Thomas Coburn, *Devī-Māhātmya*, ibid., 229. Coburn discusses one precedent in the *Mahābhārata* in which Mahisha attacks the gods and is quelled by the god Skanda. See his *Devī-Māhātmya*, ibid., 222-227.

story demonstrated the Goddess's transcendent power, this second story demonstrates her secular power.

The third and final story in the *Devī Māhātmya* is a lengthy one in which the Goddess battles many demons, including Raktabeeja, Chanda and Munda, and Shumbha and Nishumbha. This story teaches that the many goddesses are really only one Goddess. In Coburn's words: "There need be no paradox or contradiction between transcendence and immanence, nor between either of these and internality, because all of these are manifestations of one power. The forms of power are many, but the fact of power is one."[18] The *Devī Māhātmya* concludes by returning to its frame story, wherein the king and the merchant are persuaded to worship the Goddess by the sage's stories. After three years of this worship, the Goddess appears before the men to grant them each a wish. The merchant chooses liberation, while the king chooses eternal kingship.

But even after an "original" text like the *Devī Māhātmya* is decided upon as the source behind the *Tales of Durga* comic book, there are still other questions that arise. Does the author actually read this Sanskrit text? And what visual references are considered authentic for the artist to employ? In the following discussion, I will examine how this classical Sanskrit mythological text about Goddess Durga has been recast in this modern visual medium in order to better understand the way in which these comic books mediate authenticity.

SEQUENCING DURGA

As a form of sequential art that incorporates both text and image, comic books are a truly unique medium. The great comic book artist Will Eisner, for instance, defines comics as "Sequential Art" that "communicate[s] in a 'language' that relies on a visual

[18] Thomas Coburn, *Devī-Māhātmya*, ibid., 305.

experience common to both creator and audience" and contains an "image-word mix."[19] As a form of sequential art, comic books tell stories through a procession of panels, each of which often contains a mixture of text and image. Thus the comic reader must be savvy enough to navigate through the series of panels, taking in both text and image and bridging the gaps between each panel in order to unfurl meaning. Creating and reading comics are therefore both more complex processes than is often realized. Discussing this with regard to English-language comics in particular, Lawrence Abbott writes:

> The order in which one perceives the various textual and pictorial elements of a single panel – not to mention a series of panels – depends on eye movement. Interestingly, eye movement in a panel is determined by both the left-to-right, top-to-bottom conventions of reading and by the freer patterns associated with the contemplation of pictures. The good comic artist knows how to work the two seemingly unrelated eye operations to his advantage.[20]

Like Abbott, Ann Marie Seward Barry has also recognized the complexity of comics in their sequential nature and their intimate blending of two systems of expression: a verbal language, which is "essentially a linear system," with visual imagery, which is "closely associated with direct perception and experience."[21] Together, she argues, the combination of word and image in sequential comic panels forms a system that encourages us as readers to focus our attention on details, such as the narrative text and visual landscapes and backgrounds, as well as universal patterns, such as the expressions

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[19] Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (Expanded Edition. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985), 7. For alternate definitions of comics as a sequential art form, see Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), 8; and Robert C. Harvey, "Comedy at the Juncture of Word and Image: The Emergence of the Modern Magazine Gag Cartoon Reveals the Vital Blend" in R. Varnum and C. Gibbons, eds., *The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 76.

[20] Lawrence L. Abbott, "Comic Art: Characteristics and Potentialities of a Narrative Medium," *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1986), 159.

[21] Ann Marie Seward Barry, *Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 107.

and postures of the characters, "into which we project our own experience."[22] As we progress from panel to panel, following the linear narrative text and reading the dialogue, our gaze also lingers on the characters' frozen postures, gestures, and expressions, and in the process we absorb their emotional states and identify with those emotions. "Meaning," she concludes, "is thus derived from experiential sequence."[23] In his own way, Scott McCloud posits a similar argument when he explains – through sequential panels that depict a man in glasses speaking directly to the reader via dialogue balloons – that viewer-identification is a specialty of comics and cartooning: "You give me life by reading this book and by 'filling up' this very iconic (cartoony) form. Who I am is irrelevant. I'm just a little piece of you. But if who I am matters less, maybe what I say will matter more. That's the theory, anyway."[24]

Amar Chitra Katha comic books are indeed a sequential art form in which meaning unfolds as the reader follows the textual and visual narrative elements and increasingly identifies with the hero. Thus in producing the *Tales of Durga* comic book, the comics producers first had to single out a "hero" – or heroine – to organize the narrative around. The obvious choice, of course, is the goddess Durga. But the *Devī Māhātmya* is a particularly challenging text to transform into this visual medium, for in it the Goddess is not present as a character in the initial frame story, where she is only mentioned by sage Medhas, nor is she physically present in the first story, where she takes the form of Mahamaya, the intangible but powerful form of the Goddess that keeps Vishnu from awakening. It is not until the second story, in which Durga slays the buffalo

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[22] Ann Marie Seward Barry, *Visual Intelligence*, ibid., 109. On the universality of cartoon imagery, also see Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, op. cit., pp. 100-121, and Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, op. cit., pp. 31-45.

[23] Ann Marie Seward Barry, *Visual Intelligence*, ibid., 113.

[24] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, op. cit., 37.

demon, that the Goddess appears as a character that can be rendered in a visual medium. How, then, to even begin the comic book?

Like all comic books, each *Amar Chitra Katha* story begins with a "splash" page. Will Eisner explains the great importance of the splash page in this way:

> The first page of the story functions as an introduction. What, or how much, it contains depends on the number of pages that follow. It is a launching pad for the narrative, and for most stories it establishes a frame of reference. Properly employed it seizes the reader's attention and prepares his attitude for the events to follow. It sets a 'climate.'[25]

The style of the splash page varies in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books, depending on a variety of factors, including which artist designed the page and how much room the artist had to work with, but these pages are almost always specially designed to grab the reader's attention by introducing the hero. If room allows, the splash page is a full-page panel with strong visual appeal and minimal text. For instance, the first page of the historical *Subhas Chandra Bose* issue (no. 77, 1975) prominently features a large and detailed image of the ancestral home of our hero, Subhas Chandra Bose, placed under the title of the issue – the hero's name – which spans across the top of the page **[Fig. 2.1]**. To the bottom left is a circular inset panel featuring baby Subhas upon his mother's lap, with his father standing at their side. This round inset invites us as readers into the ancestral home that fills the rest of the page, allowing us to join this biographical narrative at the very beginning. To the right of this round panel the text in the narrative box reads: "Subhas Chandra Bose was born in Cuttack, Orissa, on January 23, 1897. His mother was Prabhavati and his father, the famous lawyer, Janaki Nath Bose."[26] When I spoke with artist Souren Roy about this splash page, I asked him whether he'd been given visual instructions by the editor or author to design the splash page in this way. With a

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[25] Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, op. cit., 62.

[26] *Subhas Chandra Bose*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 77 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1975), 1.

smile, he replied, "Well, you don't have to follow the visual instructions carefully. You can make additions, changes. And they appreciate it when we do so. Because often the visual artist knows better how something should be put into image."[27] Upon hearing this, I asked Mr. Roy to discuss further the process of creating this page. He described it in this way:

> I did a lot of research for *Subhas Chandra Bose*. I visited Janakinath Bhavan, where Netaji [Subhas Chandra Bose] was born, and made some sketches. It is where his life began, so it is where the story must begin also. And I looked at photos, and many books. The artist must do a lot of work. Back then, you know, Janakinath Bhavan was not in good condition, it was neglected, so I had to imagine what it was like in Netaji's time. Now that it is a museum, it is protected. I wanted to show what it was like, a nice home, so that everyone would know Netaji's birthplace.[28]

For this artist, then, the splash page was so important that he decided to exercise his creative freedom and conduct his own research in order to produce a full-page splash panel that would both educate and entice the reader.

The mythological *Hanuman* issue (no. 19, 1971), like *Subhas Chandra Bose*, also begins with a full-page splash panel that introduces the hero **[Fig. 2.2]**. Here young Hanuman is in the center of the page, leaping high into the air with his arms outstretched and his face tilted upwards, grabbing for the big red, ripe sun that is in the center of the image's top register. To the top left, next to the sun, is a narrative box in the form of a red scroll that proclaims the title of this issue. Beneath Hanuman are the trees, houses, and fields of a village, details that serve to indicate how high our hero has leapt. In the bottom right corner is another narrative box in the form of a scroll, with text that reads: "Hanuman was the child of Pavana, the wind god. One day he saw the rising sun and thinking it to be an apple, he leapt towards it."[29] If space is tight, on the other hand, the

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[27] Souren Roy, interviewed by the author in Calcutta, February 5, 2002.
[28] Souren Roy, ibid.
[29] *Hanuman, Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 19 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1971), 1.

splash page is usually subdivided into a half- or two-thirds-page panel on top, featuring the hero and the title of the issue, and two square panels on the bottom with more narrative text that begin to move the story forward. In either case, whether full-page or not, the splash panel should clue us readers in to the identity of the hero, so that we eagerly proceed on to the next panels in order to learn more about our hero and to partake in his or her adventures.

The *Tales of Durga* comic book, however, begins with a splash page featuring the buffalo demon Mahisha (a Sanskrit term meaning "buffalo") in a full frontal position in a large panel that occupies the top two-thirds of the page **[Fig. 2.3]**. After some deliberation, the producers decided to skip the frame story of the *Devī Māhātmya*, as well as the first story of the Goddess, and begin the comic book with the second story, which is far more dynamic and suitable for the comic book medium.[30] Yet even in this second story in the *Devī Māhātmya*, goddess Durga does not appear right away; instead, it is with the demon Mahisha that the story begins. In the interest of authenticity, therefore, the scriptwriter and artist had to break the *Amar Chitra Katha* template and begin this issue not with the heroine, but with the anti-hero.

On this splash page, the eye wanders from Mahisha as he performs his austerities to the right, taking in the approaching chariot that flies through the air in the background, as well as the title of this first story, "Durga – The Slayer of Mahisha," which is printed in the upper right corner. As the eye next drops to read the narrative text at the bottom of this panel, we learn that Mahisha performs these severe austerities in order to propitiate and win a boon from Lord Brahma, who now approaches him. Next the eye moves on to the bottom left panel, in which Brahma has indeed landed his chariot and appeared before

[30] Subba Rao, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 8, 2002; and Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 8, 2002.

Mahisha, and now holds his right hand in the air in a beneficent gesture. Mahisha bows before Brahma, asking in a dialogue balloon to be made immortal. In reply, Brahma tells him that he cannot escape death. As the eye crosses over into the bottom right panel, it focuses upon the close-up image of Mahisha and his thought balloon. After reading the redundant narrative text at the top, which tells us that Mahisha became thoughtful, we read Mahisha's direct thoughts as he ponders what alternate boon to ask of Brahma. The entire focus of this page is therefore upon the asura Mahisha, for the first panel introduces him as an austere figure who commands the attention of Lord Brahma; the next introduces Mahisha's desire for immortality; and in the third Mahisha tries to think of a way to achieve immortality. With only moment-to-moment panel transitions on this page, which require little work or input from the reader to render the sequence meaningful as the activity and duration between each panel is minimal, we as readers are meant to focus our attention upon a single subject: Mahisha.[31] Indeed, the only clue that exists on this page to signal to the discerning reader that Mahisha is not, in fact, our hero is the story title in the upper right-hand corner.

At the top of the second page Mahisha requests an alternate boon: that he may only be killed at the hands of a woman, which, he figures, is as good as immortality. The following panels continue to focus upon Mahisha as he commands his troops, wages war against the gods, achieves victory, and ascends the throne at the bottom of the fourth page **[Fig. 2.4]**. As the battle between Mahisha and the gods wages on these pages, action-to-action panel transitions that highlight the exchange of blows on the battlefield are interspersed with subject-to-subject panel transitions that shift the perspective of the scene, alternating between the gods as they increasingly lose ground and Mahisha as he

[31] On moment-to-moment and other types of panel transitions and the demands they place upon the reader, see Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, ibid., 70-80.

emerges victorious. There are no visual clues (aside, perhaps, from his dark skin color) that Mahisha is the bad guy – the arch-villain – in these first thirteen panels. Not until the fifth page does the narrative begin to shift focus **[Fig. 2.5]**. Here Mahisha's men harass the people, telling them that they must forsake their chosen gods and worship only Mahisha. The bottom panel of the fifth page is carefully placed to contrast with the bottom panel of the fourth page: on page four Mahisha sits on the throne, a victorious king surrounded by his loyal demon horde; on the opposite page an enthroned idol of Mahisha is worshipped by citizens under duress who secretly call out to their own gods for salvation. It is only here, on the bottom of the fifth page, that the first visual suggestion is made that Mahisha may not be the hero of this comic book.

Finally, in the twentieth panel, at the bottom half of the sixth page, Durga – our heroine – appears **[Fig. 2.6]**. In this panel the goddess has just been conjured up by the gods. She is resplendent, illuminated by the rays of light (*tejas*) that the gods used to create her. She shines, in contrast to the dark-skinned Mahisha.[32] The miraculous nature of this occurrence is highlighted in both the text and the image. The narrative text takes on a reverent tone when discussing the miracle of the creation of the Goddess, commenting, "And lo! The next moment, out of that light a female form with a thousand arms came into being! It was Devi Durga."[33] The image is equally reverent, depicting a majestic and serene many-armed Durga shrouded in a radiant halo and encircled by the other gods. It recalls the description of the goddess in the *Devī Māhātmya*, who just after her creation is described as

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[32] Significantly, the heroes of these comics are often fair-skinned, handsome men and women, while the villains are dark-skinned, stout men and women with wide lips and noses. This racialized depiction is discussed further in Chapter 3. Also, although "tejas" is translated as "light" in the comic book, it is a far more powerful concept. For further information on tejas see Jarrod Whitaker, "Divine Weapons and *Tejas* in the Two Indian Epics," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 43.2 (2000), 87-113. On tejas specifically in this context in the *Devī Māhātmya* see Thomas Coburn, *Devī-Māhātmya*, op. cit., 229-230.

[33] *Tales of Durga*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 176, op. cit., 6.

filling the triple world with her radiance,

Causing the earth to bow down at the tread of her feet, scratching the sky with her diadem,

Making all the nether regions tremble at the sound of her bowstring,

Standing (there) filling all the directions with her thousand arms.[34]

In this panel, Anant Pai's recent decision to embrace the miraculous in mythological narratives is made abundantly evident.

But Durga's appearance before us, majestic though it is, is brief. In the four panels on the next page her presence in the scene is only suggested – not shown. Instead, the subject shifts so that we first see the gods in prayer, while their joint speech balloon tells us that it is Durga that they pray to in the hopes that she will be able to defeat Mahisha. In the next three panels the gods offer up their various weapons, asking Durga to accept them in preparation for her martial mission. Thus at the end of the seventh page, halfway through this story, the heroine of this issue has appeared in only one panel.

In the twenty-fifth panel, at the top of the eighth page, Durga reappears, mounted upon her lion and ready for battle, emitting a "blood-curdling roar." But in the next panels the focus again shifts away from her. With scene-to-scene panel transitions we see the seas tremble and the mountains shake at that fierce roar, and in the bottom panel Mahisha takes notice of the disturbance. At the top of the next page, in the twenty-ninth panel, Durga makes her third appearance: this time before Mahisha **[Fig. 2.7]**. But who is the hero and who the villain in this panel? Durga's presence is larger, for she is in the foreground and occupies half of the panel, mounted upon her lion with her array of arms and weapons. Yet her back is to the reader, so we cannot see her expression – we do not know if she looks fierce, or confident, or, rather, if she is intimidated by Mahisha.

[34] Verses 2.36-2.38 in Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, op. cit., 42.

Mahisha, on the other hand, faces the reader, and it is to him that the eye is drawn as he confidently proclaims, "Ho! A mere female!" Mahisha stands in a challenging posture, with his muscles taut, his sword at the ready, and the hint of a smirk upon his face.

On the bottom half of this ninth page the perspective finally shifts with a moment-to-moment transition to indicate that Durga is truly the real hero here. In the bottom left panel Durga advances forward, explaining that she is "no mere female," while Mahisha steps backward, thrown off balance. Here it is Mahisha's back that is presented to the viewer, and Durga that we look up to in all of her martial glory. Mahisha then steps further back and turns to his men for help in the next panel, and from this point forward Durga has Mahisha on the run as he shape-shifts into buffalo, lion, and elephant forms while battling the goddess. On the following several pages in action-packed panel after action-packed panel the battle wages on, until the showdown finally comes to an end on the final page of this sequence **[Fig. 2.8]**. Here our heroine leaps upon the charging buffalo's back, stabs him with her trident, and decapitates him with her sword while retaining a serene half-smile all the while. In the final half-page panel at the bottom of page fifteen Mahisha lies dead at Durga's feet, and the gods reappear to proffer their grateful salutations to the goddess.

In its complex narrative sequencing – its reliance upon text to clarify the image, its lack of purposeful grouping of panels, its limited attention to page breaks, and its overlong battle sequences – as well as its prolonged focus upon the antihero from the splash page forward, the *Tales of Durga* issue stands apart from other mythological issues in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series. For instance, the *Rama* issue (no. 15, 1970) opens with a splash page that allows for no ambiguity about the identity of the hero. In this full-page panel, our eye is immediately drawn to Ram, the handsome blue-skinned youth with the bow and arrow who stands in the center of the image. After looking him over, the eye

next moves to the right, taking in the title of the issue in the top corner and one of Ram's brothers poised at his side, before moving back to the left side to take in the other two brothers and the city of Ayodhya in the background, and then finally dropping below Ram to read the narrative text. Although this text informs us that King Dasharatha ruled Ayodhya and fathered four sons, the visual focus here is clearly not Dasharatha – who is not even depicted in the panel – but one of his four sons, Ram.

And in the brief narrative sequence that follows on the next two pages, Ram remains the object of focus – the clear hero – in this *Rama* issue. Whereas it is the arch villain Mahisha that we look up to on the splash page of *Tales of Durga*, and Mahisha who is featured in the first six out of seven panels and who wins the first battle sequence, it is Ram who is featured in the first six out of seven panels here. After a panel showcasing Ram's archery skills – in which Ram stands amidst his admiring brothers, his hand still in the air, having just released an arrow to pierce the bull's-eye of a target in the distance – the villains are introduced in the next panel with a subject-to-subject transition **[Fig. 2.9]**. Here, in the large panel at the bottom of the second page, Sage Vishwamitra is shown being interrupted in his prayers by a pack of demons that pollutes the sacred fire. Ram is not depicted, but the narrative text at the bottom and Vishwamitra's thought balloon inform us that with his bow and arrow "Rama alone can help."[35] In the next panel, at the top of the third page, the visual focus returns to Ram as he battles the giant demoness Tataka **[Fig. 2.10]**. In the sequence of four panels on this page that makes up their battle scene, the contrast with the Durga-Mahisha battle is great. These four panels can be understood even without the accompanying text, for the visual action depicted here is very clear. In the top panel Tataka approaches, sword drawn, and is pointed out to Ram by Sage Vishwamitra. In response, Ram grabs an arrow. In the second panel Ram

[35] *Rama*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 15 (Bombay: India Book House, 1970), 2.

raises his bow and arrow, taking aim at Tataka, who shields her face in fear. Here the angle of the shot has moved in a counter-clockwise direction, so that the view of the scene is no longer from a point between Ram and Tataka, but almost directly behind the demoness. In this way our attention is focused on Ram as he faces Tataka. In the Durga-Mahisha battle, on the other hand, Mahisha is the dominant figure, with an emphasis on his size and fearless charges in battle, while Durga is frequently eliminated from the panel altogether, or minimized so that only her back, arms, or weapons are included. In the next panel in the Ram-Tataka battle, Tataka lies prone at Ram's feet, with an arrow shaft standing vertically up out of her chest. The perspective is such that the viewer looks up at Ram, who still holds his bow in hand, for he is the clear victor. Finally, in the last panel Ram and his brother Laxman fend off the other demons, while Sage Vishwamitra successfully performs his prayers in the background.

This final panel on the third page is juxtaposed with the bottom panel on the second page, suggesting a resolution to this narrative segment: Vishwamitra's prayers had been interrupted by the demons, but Ram now has that problem well in hand. These panels have been purposefully grouped together on these two pages in a complete narrative segment, so that a new episode in Ram's story can begin on the fourth page. Will Eisner has commented on the significance of such sequential groupings:

> Pages are a constant in comic book narration. They have to be dealt with immediately after the story is solidified. Because the groupings of action and other events do not necessarily break up evenly, some pages must contain more individual scenes than others. Keep in mind that when the reader turns the page a pause occurs. This permits a change of time, a shift of scene, an opportunity to control the reader's focus. Here one deals with retention as well as attention. The page as well as the panel must therefore be addressed as a unit of containment although it too is merely a part of the whole comprised by the story itself.[36]

[36] Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, op. cit., 63.

In *Tales of Durga*, however, the page is not often utilized as a "unit of containment," in Eisner's words, to organize scenes. First, the action in the Durga-Mahisha battle scene lacks the visual clarity of the Ram-Tataka sequence and relies upon the text for explanation. For example, is Durga holding her ground at the top of the tenth page, or losing it to the asuras **[Fig. 2.11]**? Are the soldiers in the middle panel fighting at Durga's side, or fleeing the battleground? Second, the Durga-Mahisha battle goes on and on, spanning twenty-three panels and extending from the bottom of the ninth page to the bottom of the fifteenth page, without any apparent attempt to control the reader's focus through the purposeful grouping of panels.[37] In these pages our heroine is nearly sequenced out of the narrative, as though the producers were more interested in or comfortable with the villain. Mahisha rages across these pages, the focus of the narrative as a charging buffalo, then as a lion, then in human form, then as a great elephant, and finally in his buffalo form again, snorting and charging.

In the *Devī Māhātmya*, on the other hand, this long battle sequence serves to glorify the Great Goddess by showcasing her ability to fight and easily defeat a wide array of fierce opponents. It is a powerful, often gruesome account of Durga's awesome martial abilities, as in this description of her battle with the demon army:

> Then the Goddess with her trident, club, and showers of spears,
>
> With sword and the like slew the great Asuras by the hundreds,
>
> And she felled others who were deluded by the sound of her bell.
>
> And having bound some Asuras on the ground with her noose, she dragged them along.
>
> Others were cut in two by sharp blows from her sword.

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[37] On duration and the panel in comic reading, see Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, op. cit., 94-117; Lawrence Abbott, "Comic Art," op. cit., esp. p. 162; and Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, op. cit., 28-30.

Still others, crushed by the fall of her club, lay on the ground,

And some, much smitten by her mace, vomited blood.

Some fell to the ground, their chests rent by her spear.

Others were destroyed on the field of battle, cut by the flood of arrows.[38]

The passage goes on, describing decapitated heads and miscellaneous limbs strewn across the battlefield, and the torrents of blood that flow from the deceased armies. In the classical text, after his army has been defeated Mahisha does shift into all of the buffalo, lion, and elephant forms depicted in the comic book, but the focus is centered upon Durga as she defeats him in every form: snaring him in his buffalo form, cutting off his head in the lion form, ripping him to shreds in his human form, and cutting off his trunk in the elephant form.[39] Finally, after the Goddess has had enough of this play, she quaffs a "superior beverage," laughs with intoxication, and proceeds to slay Mahisha.[40]

VISIONS OF DURGA

In the *Tales of Durga* comic book, two other stories are told following the "Durga – the Slayer of Mahisha" tale. "Chamundi," the second story, is about the battle between Kali, who is understood here as an incarnation of Goddess Durga, and the asuras Shumbha, Chanda, and Munda. This story begins with a splash page featuring the demon Shumbha in a half-page panel in which he is wreaking havoc in the gods' abode. The gods flee to Mt. Himavat, where they again pray to Durga for their salvation. Goddess Parvati walks by at this point, and suddenly the beautiful Goddess Ambika springs forth from her. The asuras learn of Ambika's beauty and report it to Shumbha, who decides that he must have her at any cost. However, when the band of demons approaches

[38] Verses 2.54-2.58 in Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, op. cit., 43-44.
[39] See verses 3.28-3.32 in Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, ibid., 46-47.
[40] Verses 3.33-3.39 in Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, ibid., 47.

Ambika, she frowns and the Goddess Kali then springs forth from her forehead. Kali is a fierce goddess, with dark skin, a bloodstained tongue, and a garland of skulls. She rushes into battle with the demon army, quickly slays Chanda and Munda, and is therefore given the epithet "Chamundi" in the final panel.

The third story, "How Durga Slew Shumbha," continues where the second one left off, featuring even more incarnations of our heroine. In order to defeat the demon Shumbha, hundreds of "Shaktis – the inner force of various gods – issued forth assuming female forms."[41] These shaktis – including Brahmani, Vaishnavi, Maheshwari, and Chandika – battle Shumbha's army alongside Kali, eventually defeating even Raktabeeja, the asura endowed with the ability to create a new replica of himself out of each drop of his blood that spills upon the ground. Ultimately, all of the demons save Shumbha are defeated. At this point Shumbha complains to Durga, telling her she should not take any pleasure in her victory, since she achieved it only with the help of many others. In reply, Durga explains: "I am alone. The goddesses you see are but different forms of myself."[42] On the final page all of the shaktis merge into Durga before Shumbha's (and our) very eyes, proof of her statement that the hundreds of shaktis and Kali are really incarnations of Durga, who is, therefore, the Great Goddess. Durga and Shumbha then engage each other in battle one-on-one, and Durga is victorious. In the final panel of the comic book the gods appear once again to thank their savior.

In making this comic book, the producers of *Tales of Durga* necessarily had to take liberties with the *Devī Māhātmya* in order to recast it in this new medium, including shortening the stories and transforming verse into narrative text, dialogue balloons, and visual instructions. But they have clearly taken more significant liberties with the text

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[41] *Tales of Durga, Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 176, op. cit., 24.
[42] *Tales of Durga, Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 176, ibid., 30.

than this. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the elimination of the first story, and the rearrangement of the third story in the *Devī Māhātmya* so that it constitutes the final two stories in the comic book. Would it have been possible for the comic book producers to create a more "authentic" rendering of the *Devī Māhātmya*, one that at least included the first story? How does one depict the Goddess as Mahamaya, the intangible but powerful force that causes Vishnu to sleep or to wake? Are there visual references that the authors and artists at the comic book studio could have drawn upon?

Certainly, the story of the Great Goddess has been referred to for centuries in visual media like sculptures and illuminated manuscripts, yet the vast majority of these depictions are of the Goddess as Mahiṣāsuramardinī, the slayer of the buffalo demon. Indeed, the popularity of such images from the seventh century forward has led art historian Vidya Dehejia to write:

> The worship of a mother goddess as the source of life and fertility has prehistoric roots, but the transformation of that deity into a Great Goddess of cosmic powers was achieved with the composition of the *Devi Mahatmya* (Glory of the goddess), a text of the fifth to sixth century, when worship of the female principle took on dramatic new dimensions. Images of Devi killing the buffalo demon Mahishasura, her most renowned feat, appeared across the country in caves and temples, in metal and stone, in clay and paint. … This form of the goddess was so popular that followers of the Jain faith co-opted it. … Everywhere, it seems, devotees gave her a local habitation and a name.[43]

A lot of effort has been spent in trying to identify the iconographic details of these various Mahiṣāsuramardinī images with narratives from the *Devī Māhātmya* and other oral and written texts. For instance, Heinrich von Stietencron has examined five different types of Mahiṣāsuramardinī images to make the historical argument that a local north Indian myth was assimilated into the larger bhakti movement and thereafter brought tribal

[43] Vidya Dehejia, ed., *Devi: The Great Goddess: Female Divinity in South Asian Art* (Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1999), 215-216.

cults within the "Hindu" fold by linking the Great Goddess to local goddesses.[44] This assimilation of a local goddess with the Great Goddess as the slayer of the buffalo demon is thus understood in terms of the process of "Sanskritization," a two-way process whereby the Brahmanic, Sanskrit tradition (the so-called "Great Tradition") is spread by enfolding into it various elements of popular or folk origin, and local/folk themes (the so-called "little tradition") are given new sway in the form of such Brahmanical reworkings.[45] Both scholars of religious and visual history have found this discourse on Sanskritization to be compelling in their efforts to understand the goddess Durga and the *Devī Māhātmya*. Religious studies scholar Kathleen Erndl, for example, has stated that the *Devī Māhātmya* is "the prime example of indigenous goddess cults 'Sanskritized'… [and] itself later becomes a vehicle of Sanskritization in which local goddesses become identified with the Goddess who is extolled in it."[46] Similarly, art historian Joanna Williams writes:

> [T]he forms of Gupta art belong with unusual consistency to the Great or Sanskritic Tradition… In the realm of content, moreover, folk themes will be seen frequently taking on the style of fine art in [the Gupta] period: for example, the subjects of Durga killing the Buffalo Demon or the seven Mother Goddesses.[47]

Yet all too often the desire of both scholars of religious and visual history to identify and name images of goddesses by identifying a text that sets forth the corresponding iconographic elements has resulted in research that is weighted heavily in

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[44] Heinrich von Stietencron, "Die Gottin Durga Mahisasuramardini: Mythos, Darstellung und geschichtliche Rolle bei der Hinduisierung Indiens," *Visible Religion: Annual for Religious Iconography*, vol. II: Representation of Gods (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983), 118-166; see also Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, op. cit., 92-93. For a discussion of the relationship between Mahiṣāsuramardinī images and the *Cilappatikāram* text, see James C. Harle, "Durga, Goddess of Victory," *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 26, no. 3-4 (1963), 237-246.

[45] On "Sanskritization" in general, see M.N. Srinivas, "A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization," *Far Eastern Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 4 (Aug. 1956), 481-496. On "Sanskritization" with regards to the *Devī Māhātmya* in particular, see Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, op. cit., 13-18.

[46] Kathleen Erndl, *Victory to the Mother* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 22.

[47] Joanna Williams, *The Art of Gupta India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 5.

favor of the textual, allowing one to draw the conclusion that text is prior to and the inspiration for image-production. Furthermore, this emphasis on the textual has operated in conjunction with the Orientalist privileging of Sanskrit over vernacular texts, so that the Sanskritic tradition is frequently conceived of as being central and originary, while regional and non-Hindu traditions are considered marginal and derivative. Finally, the Sanskritic tradition has come to be viewed as so central to our understanding of religious images and practices in India that texts like the *Devī Māhātmya* are often extracted from their historical context and understood to be relevant to religious practices and images from the classical period to the modern period. And these early Sanskrit texts are still regularly considered the most "authentic" sources – even for comic book stories.

But can we really regard the *Devī Māhātmya* as the direct inspiration behind all of these visual narratives of the goddess Durga? If so, what explains the abundance of images of Durga slaying the buffalo demon and the scarcity of images of the other two episodes in the *Devī Māhātmya*? As Vidya Dehejia has noted, the third episode "of the destruction of the demon brothers Nishumbha and Shumbha garnered much attention in the [*Devī Māhātmya*] text, but it was not popular with artists."[48] And sculpted images of Durga as Mahamaya from the first episode are practically unknown. The only scholar to speculate about the existence of such an image, to my knowledge, is Odile Divakaran, in his discussion of the pairing of a Mahiṣāsuramardinī relief with one of Vishnu Anantaśayana (asleep on his serpent bed) in the seventh-century rock-cut Mahiṣāsuramardinī cave at Mamallapuram (alternately Mahabalipuram). Divakaran argues that this paired positioning is not coincidental, but is in fact an intentional program within Pallava art:

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[48] Vidya Dehejia, ed., *Devi: The Great Goddess*, op. cit., 216-217.

> The Mahishamardini cave in Mahabalipuram, presumably dedicated to Vishnu, shows on opposite walls a reclining Vishnu about to rise and destroy Madhu and Kaitabha and the well-known heroic Durga doing battle with Mahisha, calling to mind the thesis of the "Devi Mahatmya" that the powers of Vishnu and Devi are indivisible.[49]

As Padma Kaimal has pointed out in her discussion of other Pallava reliefs at Mamallapuram, pairing, like punning, can alert viewers or readers to convergent meanings.[50] It is quite possible that the Pallavas were familiar with the *Devī Māhātmya* and other Purāṇic literature, and therefore paired these forms of Vishnu and Durga together in the Mahiṣāsuramardinī cave and elsewhere as a "pun," that is, as a device that can be interpreted in two or more ways.[51] One may choose, as Divakaran has done, to see this pairing as evidence that the powers of Vishnu and Durga are indivisible, or one may interpret this pairing as suggestive of the supremacy of either Vishnu or Durga over one another. If the viewers were familiar with the *Devī Māhātmya*, they might view this pairing as a depiction of the Goddess's ultimate reality. In this interpretation, the panel depicting Durga slaying the buffalo demon would recall the well-known second episode of the text, while the panel depicting Vishnu Anantaśayana would recall the first episode of this text, in which the Goddess is sleep or illusion personified ("Mahamaya"); only after she withdraws from Vishnu can he wake up to fight the demons. In this reading of

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[49] Odile Divakaran, "Durga the Great Goddess" in M. Meister, ed., *Discourses on Śiva: Proceedings of a Symposium on the Nature of Religious Imagery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 281-282.

[50] Padma Kaimal, "Playful Ambiguity and Political Authority in the Large Relief at Mamallapuram," *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 24 (1994), 18. On the Pallavas' familiarity with and manipulation of Sanskrit and other textual narratives in their visual reliefs, also see Susan L. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India* (New York: Weatherhill, 1985), 303-304; and Mary-Ann Lutzker, "A Reinterpretation of the Relief Panel at Mamallapuram," *Chhavi 2* (Banaras: BKB, 1981), 113-118.

[51] Vishnu and Durga were also paired together in these forms in the Shore Temple at Mamallapuram. On punning, see Devangana Desai, "Placement and Significance of Erotic Sculpture at Khajuraho," in Michael W. Meister, ed., *Discourses on Śiva*, op. cit., esp. p. 145.

the panel, then, the Goddess's presence would be indicated by her absence – a clever pun indeed![52]

But such visual references – if indeed this set of paired reliefs is a reference – to the first story in the *Devī Māhātmya* are rare. Even more than the third episode, this first episode is quite philosophical in nature, commenting upon the nature of the Goddess as the ultimate reality – a commentary that is not as easily rendered in a visual medium, whether as part of a sculptural program or in printed form, as is the action-packed second episode in which Durga slays the demon Mahisha. Even in the tradition of manuscript illumination from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries in South Asia, martial images of Durga slaying Mahisha are quite common, and images of the slaying of Chanda and Munda are also known, while painted images of the first episode are very rare. So rare, in fact, that when discussing the illustrated folios of a sixteenth-century *Devī Māhātmya* manuscript from Nepal, Mary Slusser expresses excitement over the existence of just such an image: "One of the most remarkable miniatures in this manuscript has nothing to do with Devi's martial deeds but pertains to the first story of the *Devī Māhātmya*."[53]

In modern visual arts, as well, images of the first episode of the *Devī Māhātmya* are practically unknown. As nationalist sentiments rose during the colonial period, the Great Goddess was increasingly used as an allegory for the motherland, as in Abanindranath Tagore's famous painting "Bharat-mata" (ca. 1904-5), or in the lesser-known painting "Nirjatite Ashirvad" (1906) by Avinash Chandra Chattopdhyay, in which

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[52] For another discussion of such punning, see John Cort's discussion of the presence of the liberated and therefore absent Jina as indicated by a silhouette carved out of the metal of a copper *siddhapratima yantra*. John Cort, "Art, Religion, and Material Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 64, no. 4 (1996), 620.

[53] Mary Slusser, catalogue entry no. 9 in the "Cosmic Force" section of Vidya Dehejia, ed., *Devi: The Great Goddess*, op. cit., 228-229. A second painted image of this first episode can be seen in the 1781 *Devī Māhātmya* manuscript from Guler that is now in the Lahore Museum. See Vidya Dehejia, ed., *Devi: The Great Goddess*, ibid., 42.

Goddess Durga rewards a freedom fighter with heavenly blessings.[54] Throughout the twentieth century, a variety of popular images of Durga and Kali were also widely available in the form of poster art, including nationalist prints of the Goddess as Mother India, religious prints of the ten-headed cosmic Kali, and the ever-popular Durga as Mahiṣāsuramardinī.[55] Given the scarcity of images of the first episode in the *Devī Māhātmya*, there was very little available in the way of visual references for the comic book producers as they wrote the script for *Tales of Durga* and composed the pencil sketches.

For artist Souren Roy, it was easy to conclude that the comic book must focus on Durga slaying the buffalo demon, as this is the most important story of the goddess for modern Hindus. When I asked him whether it was important that he be familiar with the *Devī Māhātmya* to create this issue, he replied:

> Yes. There are descriptions of the events, and the asuras, in the text. But as you know there are images of Durga everywhere in Calcutta. So I was already quite familiar with Durga. We Hindus grow up with Durga, we know the stories, we know how she looks.[56]

Like the artist Ram Waeerkar, who mentioned in discussing the making of the very first issue, *Krishna* (no. 11, 1969), that he didn't need any visual references for the issue because as a Hindu he'd been "studying" Krishna since he was a young boy,[57] here Mr. Roy similarly maintains that modern narratives and devotional images are as important, as authoritative – if not more so – as classical texts. Likewise, when asked whether he read the *Devī Māhātmya* in Sanskrit or used an English translation when writing the *Tales*

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[54] See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), esp. pp. 226-312 on Abanindranath Tagore and pp. 196-197 on Avinash Chandra Chattopadhyay.

[55] See, for instance, the collection of images in Gerald James Larson, Pratapaditya Pal, and H. Daniel Smith, *Changing Myths and Images: Twentieth-Century Popular Art in India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Art Museum, 1997).

[56] Souren Roy, interviewed by the author in Calcutta, February 5, 2002.

[57] See Chapter 1.

of Durga script, author Subba Rao replied that translations of both the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* and the later *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* are equally authentic sources:

> *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* is available in English translation. You could refer to any standard translation – there may be two such translations. For Durga, *Devī Purāṇa* is another source. You may refer to it also. I do not recall whether I compared the two and decided on the *Mārkaṇḍeya*, or whether *Mārkaṇḍeya* was just easily accessible.[58]

Together, the comments of Souren Roy and Subba Rao indicate that a wide variety of sources from the classical to the postcolonial period – ritual practices, visual traditions, and popular culture, as well as canonical texts and translations of those texts – are equally important in creating these new "authentic" comic book narratives.

A STORY FOR 'ALL THINKING INDIANS'?

Reflecting upon the different attempts various comics artists have made over the past hundred years to render *Hamlet* in comic format, Marion Perret has commented that it seems highly improbable that "Shakespeare's complicated, introspective Prince Hamlet could become the hero in a medium privileging visual, physical action."[59] However, Perret notes, "even the most philosophical soliloquy can become visually active when the artist, recognizing that its action lies primarily in the slowly developing speech and the responses of the reader, draws for the mind as well as the eye."[60] While most of the comics artists fail, in her opinion, to express the philosophical nature of Hamlet's character in their zeal to portray emotion and action and thereby heighten the visual appeal of the comic, Perret argues that the artist Tom Mandrake, illustrator of the new 1990 Classics Illustrated *Hamlet* (no. 5), has succeeded where these other artists have failed – in making the text a "lively presence" by making the reader an active creator of

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[58] Subba Rao, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 8, 2002.
[59] Marion D. Perret, " 'And Suit the Action to the Word': How a Comics Panel Can Speak Shakespeare," in R. Varnum and C. Gibbons, eds., *The Language of Comics*, op. cit., 123.
[60] Marion Perret, " 'And Suit the Action to the Word'," ibid.

the narrative.[61] Through a superpanel featuring Hamlet walking across the great hall and surrounded by a trail of sixteen small speech balloons, each containing a brief segment of the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy, Mandrake invites his readers to take in this speech as one whole by presenting it on a single page, yet encourages them to pause between each balloon to glance back at the hero and his surroundings while considering the words and reflecting upon them. In Perret's words:

> In this medium, as the eye moves, the mind moves, nimbly reassessing and reinterpreting. Mandrake's graphics keep us measuring verbal text against visual context, pondering Hamlet's analysis of why men don't act and how this truth applies to him – for this prince, especially in his soliloquies, thinking *is* acting and leads toward further action. Hamlet's mind is a stage on which he rehearses.[62]

I mention this article here because the *Devī Māhātmya*, like the play *Hamlet*, is a philosophical treatise that is not easy to visualize as action. Yet the creators of the *Tales of Durga* comic could have produced a more "authentic" rendering of the philosophical treatise of the *Devī Māhātmya* in the Classics Illustrated style, had they chosen to. The brief first story of the *Devī Māhātmya* could have been incorporated in just two pages: on the top half of the first page Vishnu would lie asleep upon his snake, beneath the title of the story. The narrative text at the bottom of this panel would explain, paraphrasing the text of the *Devī Māhātmya*, that the Goddess was the blessed sleep of Vishnu and had made her abode in his eyes.[63] In the bottom left panel, while Vishnu continues to sleep, the demons Madhu and Kaitabha arise out of his ear. In the bottom right panel, Vishnu remains in his oblivious slumber in the background, while Madhu and Kaitabha attack Brahma in the foreground. At the top of the second page in a large half panel, the narrative text would explain that in order to awaken Vishnu, Brahma praised the Goddess. This panel would feature Brahma prone before Vishnu's eyes, praising the

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[61] Marion Perret, " 'And Suit the Action to the Word'," ibid., 136.
[62] Marion Perret, " 'And Suit the Action to the Word'," ibid., 140.
[63] See verses 1.49-1.53 in Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, op. cit., 36.

Goddess through several short speech balloons which each contain segments of his prayer, drawn directly from an English translation of the *Devī Māhātmya*.[64] In the bottom left panel on this second page, Vishnu rises. And finally, in the bottom right panel, Vishnu slays Madhu and Kaitabha with his discus. The final narrative text would proclaim that this victory was due to the majesty of the Goddess. In such a rendering, the readers would be invited to read Brahma's praises, even to join him in praising the Goddess by reading those prayers aloud, and to pause between the verses and also between the panels to consider the Goddess's relationship with Vishnu and Brahma and her nature as the ultimate reality.

But the creators of *Tales of Durga* did not arrive at the same solution as Mandrake did in his comic vision of *Hamlet*: they did not opt to include any of the original philosophical speeches, nor did they focus on the philosophical nature of the *Devī Māhātmya* through other means. Instead, this comic rendering of the *Devī Māhātmya* has eliminated the poetic hymns in favor of action shots, lengthy battle sequences, and emotional appeal. In fact, one could certainly make the argument that despite the producers' emphasis on the "accuracy" and "authenticity" of the comic book rendering of this classical tale, the *Tales of Durga* issue fails to capture even the basic storyline of the original text. But unlike Marion Perret's take on Hamlet's story, I do not believe that the only good comic rendering of Durga's story is one in which the philosophical nature of that story is expressed, and that all other renderings are "failures." Rather, I am more interested in how this comic book attempts to popularize the classical *Devī Māhātmya* text by making it accessible to "all thinking Indians," to refer back to the words of associate editor Kamala Chandrakant.[65] In so doing, narrative elements from the *Devī*

[64] For instance, verses 1.54-1.67 in Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, ibid., 36-38.
[65] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.

Māhātmya have been co-opted and repositioned in the comic book alongside other elements that are drawn from the larger Great Goddess tradition as it persists in more popular forms, including oral, visual, ritual, and festive practices. One thing that all of these forms have in common is an emphasis upon action, on Durga slaying the buffalo demon, which has continued to capture the imagination of audiences across the centuries and to inspire new verbal and visual narrative accounts of that act. Indeed, during the festival of Durga Puja each year, Durga's victory over Mahisha is heartily celebrated, and while many devotees do pay to have the *Devī Māhātmya* recited in its entirety during this time, little attention is otherwise paid to the entire narrative of the classical text.[66]

In other important ways, as well, this comic book maintains a continuity with the larger Great Goddess tradition even as it deviates from the *Devī Māhātmya*. For instance, in addition to eliminating the first story of the *Devī Māhātmya* and the creative rearrangement of the latter two stories into three, another significant alteration to the classical narrative of the Goddess in this comic book is the incorporation of the notion that Durga is created by the gods because of the demon Mahisha's boon that he can be killed only at the hands of a woman. In the *Devī Māhātmya*, the beginning of the second story is much simpler. Mahisha conquers the gods and takes over their abode. All of the exiled gods then approach Vishnu and Shiva, who grow angry when they learn of Mahisha's doings. Thus "with furrowed brows and twisted faces," a great fiery splendor (*tejas*) emerges from Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma, as well as all of the other gods. And from that splendor the Goddess emerges: "That peerless splendor, born from the bodies of all the gods, unified and pervading the triple world with its luster, became a woman."[67]

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[66] On Durga Puja rituals, see David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 106-115; and Dennis Hudson, "The Ritual Worship of Devi," in Vidya Dehejia, ed., *Devi: The Great Goddess*, op. cit., 73-98.

[67] Verses 2.1-2.12 in Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, ibid., 39-40.

Significantly, there is no boon to "explain" why the Goddess was created as a woman. In the *Devī Māhātmya*, the Goddess emerges in the form of a woman simply because ultimate reality is feminine.[68] But in the comic book, Mahisha earns a boon from Brahma for his austerities, and with that boon requests, "If I must die, Lord, let it be at the hands of a woman." "So be it," replies Brahma, and immediately after he leaves, Mahisha, believing that he has outwitted Brahma, chuckles to himself, "How can a woman, a helpless creature, kill me? You have as good as granted me the boon of immortality!"[69] This idea of the boon is, as Cynthia Ann Humes has pointed out, a later interpolation that dates to the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and has remained popular ever since.[70]

Finally, a third significant alteration to the classical narrative of the Goddess as told in the *Tales of Durga* comic is the presentation of the goddess Kali. Whether in a classical text, medieval sculpture, or a modern comic, Durga is always depicted with a calm, confident smile, even when in the midst of a particularly brutal battle. Kali, on the other hand, is described as a gruesome, even horrifying, presence in the *Devī Māhātmya*, with emaciated skin, a widely gaping mouth and lolling tongue, and sunken, reddened eyes.[71] Furthermore, when battling the demon Raktabeeja, Kali (also called Chamunda) drinks heartily of all of his spilled blood and thereby prevents further Raktabeeja clones from arising:

> Camunda took it [the blood] all into her mouth, from every direction,
>
> And also into her mouth entered the great demons who were born from his blood.

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[68] On the feminine principle in the *Devī Māhātmya* and as compared with other philosophical and Purāṇic sources, see Tracy Pintchman, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), esp. pp. 119-122.

[69] *Tales of Durga*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 176, op. cit., 2.

[70] Cynthia Ann Humes, "Is the Devī Māhātmya a Feminist Scripture?" in A. Hiltebeitel and K. Erndl, eds., *Is the Goddess a Feminist?: The Politics of South Asian Goddesses* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 139.

[71] See verses 7.5-7.7 in Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, op. cit., 61.

Camunda chewed them up, and drank his blood.

With spear, thunderbolt, arrows, swords, and lances the Goddess

Wounded Raktabija, whose blood was being drunk by Camunda.

Mortally wounded by that constellation of weapons, the great demon Raktabija

Fell to the earth bloodless, O king!

And then, O king, the gods entered into boundless joy.[72]

But in the *Tales of Durga* comic book, Kali is sanitized **[Fig. 2.12]**. In appearance, her gruesome characteristics are minimized so that despite the lolling tongue and garland of skulls around her neck, she is neither emaciated nor does her expression seem particularly fearsome without the sunken eyes and gaping mouth that prominently features her fangs. Here Kali has a nicely curved figure, a calm demeanor, and wears a pleasant expression behind her tongue. This is not the horrific, bloodthirsty Kali of the *Devī Māhātmya*. Even the matter of the blood drinking is circumscribed in the comic. When Durga asks Kali to prevent the blood of Raktabeeja's clones from reaching the ground, Kali replies, "Leave it to me. Not a drop of their blood shall stain the earth again."[73] In the next panel, Durga and the various shaktis vigorously hurl their various weapons at the demons. The narrative text informs us only that during this attack "Kali prevented the birth of any more asuras," but not how she accomplishes this, and neither does the visual show us just how Kali managed to prevent further asuras. Instead, Kali occupies the left foreground of the image, and appears to oversee this whole battle from the air. Neither textually nor visually are we readers told the means by which Kali prevented more Raktabeejas from arising; instead, the reader must infer these means – that Kali miraculously drank the blood of every wounded demon before that blood could fall to the earth.

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[72] Verses 8.58-8.61 in Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, ibid., 67.
[73] *Tales of Durga*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 176, op. cit., 28.

When discussing his change of heart about the depiction of miracles, it was this scene in particular that Anant Pai first spoke of. I cite him again here, briefly:

> In the story Durga shoots her arrows at the demon Mahisha Asura, and from every drop of blood that the demon [Raktabeeja] sheds a new demon arises. This has a symbolic meaning: it means that you can't cure violence with violence. But if I changed the story because it is not scientific, then these symbolic meanings are also altered.[74]

In light of Anant Pai's new policy that all mythological stories must be told "authentically, without changes," this decision to omit the miracle of Kali drinking Raktabeeja's blood is significant. Here another of Anant Pai's guiding philosophies – his motto about truth and pleasantness – seems to have trumped the policy of authority and accuracy: "'One must tell the truth, one must tell what is pleasant; but don't tell what is unpleasant just because it is true.' In Sanskrit this is 'satyam bruyāt priyam bruyāt mā bruyāt satyam apriyam.'"[75] Yes, Kali had a thirst for blood in the *Devī Māhātmya* – but this need not be depicted just because it is "true" or "authentic," especially if it might alienate modern readers' sensibilities.

But which readers? Was this editorial decision made in order to spare children from gratuitous violence? I approached Anant Pai with this question on another occasion, and his reply was brief: "It is not just too violent for children. It is also too violent for adults. You see, Hindus do not do blood worship, sacrifice. They do not want to see blood drinking."[76] For Anant Pai, an upper middle-class, upper-caste, vegetarian Hindu, a more sanitized version of the Goddess and her story was needed than the one found in the *Devī Māhātmya*. The author of the *Tales of Durga* script, Subba Rao, who is also an upper-caste, middle-class Hindu, similarly expressed discomfort with the

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[74] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 17, 2002.
[75] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, February 18, 2002.
[76] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 8, 2002.

portrayal of the Goddess in the classical text. When I discussed the process of researching and writing the script with him, he confessed:

> To be honest, at that point of time I was uncomfortable with this theme. I'm not a worshipper of Mother Goddess who to me appeared bloodthirsty. For story value I chose this theme. Much later, about ten years after I wrote the title, I understood the principle of the Mother Goddess – as an embodiment of Nature at once benevolent and at the same time devouring. This is a philosophical concept. I do not think I had this in mind when I wrote this script. In fact, I do not rate *[Tales of] Durga* as one of my good scripts at all.[77]

Because he did not fully grasp the *Devī Māhātmya*'s philosophical nature at the time he wrote the *Tales of Durga* script, Mr. Rao chose to emphasize the battle action, rather than write a script in which the philosophical treatise of the classical text was visualized as action. Furthermore, his discomfort with the bloodthirsty elements of the narrative of the Great Goddess often caused him to focus more upon Mahisha and other asuras in those battle scenes with Durga, than upon Durga as the heroine.

This discomfort with the Great Goddess extends beyond the comic book and its producers, and is particularly common among middle-class, upper-caste Hindus. As Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey Kripal have pointed out, many modern Hindus – not to mention non-Hindus in India – are uncomfortable with the extreme nature of the Goddess: "[E]very culture has its own category of the exotic; for those in the Hindu mainstream, this includes Kali's various provenances – Tantra, tribal culture, historical links to social revolution, and a bloody temple cult – all of them both alluring and dangerous."[78] Similarly, Kajri Jain has commented that in modern calendar art depictions, Kali is rarely depicted now in her gruesome form:

> [U]gly or otherwise depressing depictions are seen as inauspicious, and this forms the basis for a picture's acceptance or rejection by a customer… Indeed, there is

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[77] Subba Rao, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 8, 2002.

[78] Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal, eds., *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 9.

> evidence to suggest that earlier depictions of divine power that are not unambiguously benign, such as those of the inauspicious Shani (Saturn), Krishna's cosmic form (*viraat roop*) revealed to Arjun on the battlefield in the Mahabharata, or Kali in her more terrifying aspect, have gradually disappeared from calendar prints, or have given way to interpretations with a quite different affective charge: the Krishna you see nowadays is much more the sweet, seductive, androgynous child, and similarly the sensuous treatment of Kali's tongue can sometimes verge on soft-focus eroticism.[79]

The comic book producers strive to popularize classical Sanskrit texts like the *Devī Māhātmya* through this medium because they believe that this "great literary heritage belongs to all our countrymen and should appeal to all of them."[80] Yet, as the presentation of the goddess Durga in the *Tales of Durga* comic book demonstrates, in order to make that heritage appealing to themselves and their middle-class target audience, the producers have adapted that heritage in accord with modern upper-caste, middle-class Hindu beliefs and practices. What is significant, therefore, about the discourse of "authenticity" that surrounds the production of these mythological comic books is that it is not just a mere marketing ploy used to attract parents, educators, students, and other consumers, but is also indicative of the ongoing effort on the part of the rising Hindu middle classes to legitimate their beliefs and practices and redefine them as representative of India's national culture.

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[79] Kajri Jain, "The Efficacious Image: Pictures and Power in Indian Mass Culture," *Polygraph*, no. 12 (2000), 162.

[80] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.

Chapter 3: Resacralization and the Feminine Ideal in the Visual and Ideological Culture of *Amar Chitra Katha*

While speaking with Subba Rao, a former associate editor of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, about the advantages of telling mythological and historical stories in the comic book medium, he listed several compelling benefits: "First, it sells. Second, it is easy on the mind. Third, children love pictures. Fourth, telling stories through pictures could be traced to the Buddhist period."[1] This fourth item intrigued me, as it was not the first time that an editor had made the claim to me during an interview that the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books are "Indian" not only because they tell Indian stories and are created by Indians, but also because the very medium is based on Indian antecedents. When I pressed Mr. Rao for more information about these antecedents, he gave as an example the many early visual representations of Buddhist *Jātaka* tales that can be found throughout India, mentioning in particular the paintings in the Ajanta caves. As discussed in Chapter 1, the comic book producers have claimed since the 1970s that "chitra kathas" (picture stories) are a truly Indian medium as part of their marketing strategy. By pointing out India's long history of the combined use of text and image to tell stories – including painted murals with inscriptions in Gupta-period caves, illuminated manuscripts, and scroll paintings – they hope to distance their comic books from the violence and degeneracy commonly attributed to Western comics, and thereby convince parents and educators that *Amar Chitra Katha* comics are a safe medium for use in educating modern Indian children.[2]

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[1] Subba Rao, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 5, 2002.

[2] See Chapter 1; also "The Role of Chitra Katha in School Education" (Bombay: India Book House Education Trust, 1978).

Although I agree that there is certainly a long history of the use of text and image together in South Asian civilization, I maintain that the comic book format itself – defined in Chapter 2 as a form of sequential art that contains a text-image mix in a series of panels that incorporate images, narrative text, and dialogue balloons – is a truly unique and modern medium that derives from the West.[3] Indeed, as Anant Pai himself admits, his inspiration for founding an Indian comic book series lay in the American comics that were popular throughout India in the 1950s and '60s, including *Tarzan*, *Phantom*, and *Mandrake*.[4] But although the form of *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books is modeled on the Western comic book format, I believe that the images and stories found in these comics draw upon a wide variety of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Indian antecedents in order to visualize a national identity. Discussing the Indian cinema, Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel have argued that despite its strong links with indigenous performing traditions, the Indian cinema must be understood as a "neo-tradition," one that is the product of a new public culture that arose during the nineteenth century and is inherently hybrid, as it brings together traditional Indian images with modern industrial technology.[5] Similarly, I posit that Indian comic books are the result of a combination of "modern" techniques and technologies with "traditional" Indian stories drawn from Hindu mythology and classical Sanskrit literature as they were articulated in the context of colonial modernity.

In this chapter, I examine the depiction of women in some of these modern Indian antecedents – oil painting, lithography, theatre, photography, and film – in order to

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[3] See Chapter 2. For a history of the first decades of the comics, see Brian Walker, *The Comics Before 1945* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004). For a comparative discussion of Arab comics in the East-West context, see Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 2-4.

[4] See Chapter 1.

[5] Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), esp. p. 13.

demonstrate how the visual and ideological culture of *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books originated out of the discourses on "tradition" and "modernity" that were central to the production of an Indian identity in colonial India. From the latter half of the nineteenth century forward, the female figure was vital to the process of envisioning the emerging nation of India in both colonial and nationalist discourses. Orientalists contrasted the degeneracy of contemporary Indian society with the glory of ancient Indian civilization, arguing that the status of Indian women was much higher in the past "golden age" of Hinduism, as could be evidenced by the stories of such cultured, free, and spiritual women as the epic heroine Shakuntala. Nationalists of all stripes similarly turned to this "golden age" in order to re-envision modern Indian society and the proper place of women within it. In the debates that ensued, the secular and the sacred were drawn into a new synthesis, and a newly standardized feminine ideal emerged out of this process of "resacralization," an ideal that endures to this day and is found in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books as well as other forms of public culture in India.[6]

SHAKUNTALA: 'FOREMOTHER OF ALL INDIANS'

This feminine ideal is epitomized in the *Shakuntala* (no. 12, 1970) comic book **[Fig. 3.1]**. *Shakuntala* was the second *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book to be printed, following *Krishna* (no. 11, 1969), and was the first comic book issue to feature a female protagonist. Shakuntala is an epic character whose story is first told in the *Mahābhārata* epic (ca. 500 B.C.E.-400 C.E.), although the classical Sanskrit play, *Abhijñāna-*

[6] I am building upon the term "resacralization" as employed by Patricia Uberoi in her article "Feminine Identity and National Ethos in Indian Calendar Art," *Economic and Political Weekly* (April 28, 1990), WS-44. She notes: "Sociologists are used to seeing the rise of modernity in the separation of the secular from the sacred, and there has been posited a similar process of 'desacralisation' in art history too. An examination of the archive of calendar art, on the contrary, and of Indian cinema for that matter, would suggest that there has been a continual process of '*re*sacralisation' over the last century. This is consistent with the formula of 'cultural nationalism' which identified 'tradition' with 'religion' and 'religion' with a newly constituted 'Hinduism'."

śākuntalam (ca. 4th-5th century C.E.), written by the great poet Kalidasa, is the best known version of the story.[7] The core of this story is the relationship between Shakuntala, a maiden raised in a forest hermitage, and King Dushyant. While hunting in the forest one day, King Dushyant meets Shakuntala, falls for her, and in a very short time the two are joined in a hasty marriage. Immediately afterwards, Dushyant returns to the city, leaving Shakuntala behind with the promise that he will send for her. Time passes, but Shakuntala – now pregnant with the king's son – receives no word from Dushyant. She sets out for the city on her own, but upon arriving at the king's court is stunned when Dushyant claims to have no memory of her. In both versions of the story, Shakuntala and Dushyant are happily reunited in the end, but the reasons for Dushyant's claim of forgetfulness are quite different, as is Shakuntala's response to Dushyant. Indeed, such significant alterations were made to the heroine's character between the two versions of the story that Stephanie Jamison has commented: "Though Kalidasa's Shakuntala is practically catatonic in her languor, the epic heroine is by contrast a shrewd bargainer and learned in the law."[8] Romila Thapar has also argued that the shy, modest, submissive Shakuntala of Kalidasa's play is quite different from the forthright, high-spirited, assertive Shakuntala of the *Mahābhārata*.[9] Significantly, it is Kalidasa's Shakuntala – the modest, long-suffering, self-sacrificial, submissive version of the heroine – that has been remembered and celebrated over time, and it is this Shakuntala that is featured as the first heroine of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series.

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[7] For an English translation of Kalidasa's play and also the story of Shakuntala as told in the *Mahābhārata*, see W.J. Johnson, *Kalidasa: The Recognition of Sakuntala* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). The dates that I have given for these works are taken from Johnson's text. Also see Barbara Stoler Miller, ed., *Theater of Memory: The Plays of Kalidasa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

[8] Stephanie W. Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 249.

[9] Romila Thapar, *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999).

On the cover and throughout the comic book, Shakuntala is depicted in static poses that allow our eyes to linger upon her body. A fair-skinned, voluptuous woman, she is marked as an idealized Indian woman through her posture and gestures, jewelry and ornamentation, and her sari draping and hairstyles. The cover image illustrates how central the "male gaze" is to the definition of this feminine ideal. In a groundbreaking essay on visual pleasure in the cinematic context, Laura Mulvey argued that viewing pleasure is traditionally split between the active/male and the passive/female, and that the woman's passive presence in a film functions on two levels: "as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium."[10] Whereas the man's active presence is what the spectator identifies with and what moves the plot forward, the woman's passive presence causes the narrative to halt, "to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation."[11] This "male gaze" is not limited to the cinema, but can be found in other visual media as well, including comic books. The *Shakuntala* cover presents a frozen narrative moment that reflects the active/passive gendered divide of the male gaze. Here Shakuntala sits quietly in the forest, surrounded by her animal companions who have gathered to say their goodbyes before she leaves them behind and journeys to the city. Unbeknownst to her, she is watched by Sage Kanva, her adoptive father, and a girlfriend. As they gaze upon Shakuntala from within the image, we gaze upon our heroine from the perspective of her absent male lover, whose gaze we spectators are meant to identify with. It is by viewing Shakuntala through Dushyant's eyes that she becomes an erotic, desired object.

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[10] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), 6-18. On the "male gaze" in South Asian print culture, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Women as 'Calendar Art' Icons: Emergence of a Pictorial Stereotype in Colonial India," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Oct. 26, 1991), WS-94.

[11] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," ibid.

This male gaze is employed further throughout the narrative of the comic book, as can be seen in the famous love-letter episode **[Figs. 3.2-3.3]**. Shy and therefore unable to approach Dushyant about her desire for him, Shakuntala instead writes her feelings down on a lotus leaf, which her companions then convey to the king, thereby bringing about the marriage of the hero and heroine. This narrative sequence is framed by the male lover, who secretly watches her from behind a tree while she pines for him on the top left of the page, and who ultimately marries her in a *gāndharva* ("love") marriage on the bottom of the next page.[12] The male lover's gaze is thus the pivotal point of reference, for it is his (hidden) gaze that casts Shakuntala as a desired, sensual ideal, just as it is his (revealed) gaze that causes Shakuntala to bend her head, lower her eyes, and veil herself in submission before him once he makes his presence known. The reader, like the male lover, is encouraged to appreciate the beauty of Shakuntala's form, to allow his/her glance to linger upon her full hips and downcast eyes, while simultaneously taking comfort in her purity and virtuosity.

After Sage Kanva learns of the marriage, he offers Shakuntala some advice, saying, "Don't let riches make you proud and be a good and faithful wife." Shakuntala, shown kneeling before him with her hands folded together, her head bent, and her veil (*orhni*) draped over her head, replies, "I shall do all that you say, dear father."[13] In this panel, text and image work together to emphasize Shakuntala's transformation from a carefree young maiden into a long-suffering wife. From this point forward in the story,

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[12] According to the Laws of Manu, a gāndharva marriage is the seventh of eight types of marriage, and is described as the "mutual union by desire of a maiden and the bridegroom" that is "devoted to sexual intercourse and arising from lust." See Stephanie W. Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife*, op. cit., 211; on pages 249-250 Jamison discusses the great difference in the way this marriage is portrayed in Kalidasa's play, where it is jointly initiated, and in the *Mahābhārata*, where it is initiated by the king, while Shakuntala is more hesitant and concerned with securing the legality of the marriage. The comic book is based on Kalidasa's version of the story, but has inserted modern touches in its inclusion of the word "love" and in the garlands used in the final ceremonial panel of this sequence.

[13] *Shakuntala*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 12 (Bombay: India Book House, 1970), 15.

Shakuntala patiently and without complaint endures one hardship after another: she is publicly rejected by her husband, kicked out of his court, and left to raise her son as a single mother in Sage Maricha's hermitage. After several years have passed, Dushyant realizes his mistake and, through a bit of divine intervention, is reunited with his wife. Shakuntala neither scolds nor rebukes him when he suddenly appears; rather, she greets her husband with a smile, tells him that she is happy to see him after all these years, and informs her son that this man is his father.

The comic book ends after this happy reunion, with a final blessing that is bestowed upon the couple by Sage Maricha **[Fig. 3.4]**: "Always work hard for the happiness of your people. Your son Bharat will one day become a great emperor, and our country will be called Bharat after him."[14] This ending parallels the introduction to the story that is given inside the front cover of the comic book, wherein the reader is informed of both the national importance of this story and of its heroine: "And it is claimed that it was their [Shakuntala and Dushyant's] son, Bharat, a direct ancestor of the Pandava and Kaurava princes, who gave our country its name – BHARAT."[15] When asked about the significance of Shakuntala, and why she was chosen as the heroine of the second *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book, Anant Pai explained the decision to me in these terms:

> You know the term "Bharatvarsha?" It is an original name for India. It means the land of Bharat. The comic book ends when Bharat is just a boy, because it is about Shakuntala. But the story goes on. Bharat grows up, and ascends Dushyant's throne, and brings all of India under his rule. So Shakuntala is very important, because she is the mother of Bharat. She is the mother of Bharat, the emperor, but also the foremother of all Indians.[16]

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[14] *Shakuntala*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 12, op. cit., 32.
[15] *Shakuntala*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 12, op. cit., inside front cover.
[16] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, February 20, 2002.

Thus according to the producers of this comic book, Shakuntala is not just symbolically, but quite literally also, Mother India (Bharat Mata). Here we can see the process of resacralization at work, so that the sacred and secular poles are found to be in a continuum, with the female figure "oscillating between woman-as-mother (/of the nation) and woman-as-goddess on the one hand and woman-as-sex-object on the other."[17]

Other early comic book issues featuring female protagonists are *Savitri* (no. 14, 1970), which tells the story of an epic heroine who was so devoted to her husband that the god of death restored his life; *Nala Damayanti* (no. 16, 1971), about another epic heroine, Damayanti, and her long search to find her husband Nala; *Shiva Parvati* (no. 29, 1972), about the goddess Parvati who performs prolonged acts of penance in order to win Shiva's attention and love; and *Padmini* (no. 44, 1973), the story of a historical Rajput queen who committed sati (self-immolation) in the year 1303 in order to free her husband to fight and die on the battlefield and to escape the advances of the invading king **[Fig. 3.5]**. These heroines' stories come from a variety of sources within the vast corpus of Indian mythology, history, and legend. Yet all of these heroines – historical, mythological, and legendary women – are depicted in a similar manner. How did such voluptuous, fair-skinned women, bedecked in golden ornaments and draped in revealing silken cloths, with either their eyes directly engaging the viewer or their heads bent in submission, come to be the feminine ideal? What is the relationship between classical literary heroines, such as Malavika **[Fig. 3.6]** and Shakuntala, historical queens like Padmini, and Hindu goddesses such as Sati **[Fig. 3.7]** as they are depicted in these comic books? How was the image of the heroine on the cover of the *Shakuntala* comic book arrived at, and is it significant that this image differs so greatly from earlier, premodern

[17] Kajri Jain, "Of the Everyday and the 'National Pencil': Calendars in Postcolonial India," *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, nos. 27-28 (March 1995), 74.

depictions of this figure?[18] These are some of the questions I will explore in this chapter as I investigate the feminine ideal that was constructed within the context of colonial modernity.

ENVISIONING THE IDEAL INDIAN WOMAN

The artist Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) – widely acclaimed to be "the first modern Indian painter" and "the father of modern Indian art"[19] – has frequently been cited as the progenitor of a vast array of popular Indian art today, including Indian comic books:

> In fact, along with the lithographs, his [Ravi Varma's] illustrations set the model for the so called popular arts of this century such as popular calenders [sic], *Amarchitrakathas* [sic], films and theatre productions on mythological themes including recent television serials on the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.[20]

The significance of Ravi Varma as "the Indian Artist," as Tapati Guha-Thakurta has noted, rests on his unique position in a period of transition:

> He emerged at the head of a trend of Westernisation of Indian painting within the world of Indian courts and royal households. The last of a dying breed of court artists in India, Ravi Varma became the first of a new breed of artists of modern India.[21]

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[18] For instance, for a premodern version of the Shakuntala story told through a series of 53 paintings, see Dr. Daljeet and P.C. Jain, *Shakuntala* (New Delhi: Aravali Books International, 1998).

[19] See Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger, *Popular Indian Art: Ravi Varma and the Printed Gods of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); also R. Nandakumar, "Ravi Varma and His Relevance: An Art-Historical Revaluation," in Ratan Parimoo, ed., *The Legacy of Raja Ravi Varma, the Painter* (Exhibition Catalogue; Baroda: Maharaja Fatesingh Museum Trust, 1998), 23; Anonymous, *Ravi Varma: The Indian Artist* (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1903), 15. (Although there is no mention of the author's name on this book, it is believed to have been written by Ramanand Chatterjee, the founder of *Prabasi* and *The Modern Review*. See E.M.J. Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma* [Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Lalit Kala Akademi, Government of Kerala, 1981], 52.)

[20] A. Ramachandran, "Raja Ravi Varma Exhibition – A Prologue," in R.C. Sharma, ed., *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives* (Exhibition Catalogue; New Delhi: National Museum, 1993), 22. See also Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology," in T. Niranjana et al., *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1993), 62 and 65; and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Women as 'Calendar Art' Icons," op. cit., WS91-WS99.

[21] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Westernisation and Tradition in South Indian Painting in the Nineteenth Century: The Case of Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906)," *Studies in History*, vol. 2.2 n.s. (1986), 166.

Although no consensus has been arrived at on the topic of the exact dating of the period of modernism in Indian art, or whether Ravi Varma can properly be considered a modern artist, there is certainly widespread agreement that the late nineteenth century witnessed an important transition in Indian art, and that Ravi Varma was instrumental in this transition.[22]

Ravi Varma began his career as a self-trained portrait artist in the Maratha court of Travancore, but ultimately earned his fame for his narrative paintings of mythological and historical subjects. Working in the new medium of oil, which allowed for a better simulation of reality through shadow, perspective, and depth, Ravi Varma sought to create the same magical simulation of reality in his paintings that was then being created with the camera.[23] Ravi Varma brought materiality to his images through the technical magic of Western academic realism, yet simultaneously saturated his paintings with idealism, and thereby developed what Geeta Kapur has termed a mode of "surrogate realism."[24] Ravi Varma's paintings, done in this mode of realism, were immensely

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[22] On modernism and Indian art, see Geeta Kapur, "When Was Modernism in Indian Art," *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, nos. 27-28 (Mar. 1995), 105-126; and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Visualizing the Nation: The Iconography of a 'National Art' in Modern India," *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, nos. 27-28 (Mar. 1995), 7-40. Kapur argues that modernist vocabulary was not introduced until the 1930s, and therefore classifies artists working from the latter nineteenth century into the first three decades of the twentieth century as occupying a "pre or antimodern position"; Guha-Thakurta, on the other hand, argues that Ravi Varma's artistic career "epitomized the evolving of the 'modern' in Indian art history." I am more inclined towards Guha-Thakurta's position. Also see Preminda S. Jacob, "Between Modernism and Modernization: Locating Modernity in South Asian Art," *Art Journal*, vol. 58, no. 3 (Fall 1999), 48-57.

[23] See Niyatee Shinde, "Ravi Varma the Painter and Lala Deen Dayal, the Photographer: Contemporaries in Time, Sharing the Horizon," in R. Parimoo, ed., *The Legacy of Raja Ravi Varma*, op. cit., 66-69; Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), esp. pp. 82-96.

[24] Geeta Kapur, "Representational Dilemmas of a Nineteenth-Century Painter: Raja Ravi Varma," in *When Was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), 150. She writes: "Among the several facets of realism manifest in the nineteenth century it is salon painting shading into a second phase of neoclassicism that offers the canon and, with it, a conservative idealism. An artist like Ravi Varma adapts this conservative representational mode of European painting. Just as prose fiction, especially the novel and its narrative project, comes to be regarded in India as per se realistic (the realist novel is queen of genres), representational paining in oils is considered to mean an enabling technique that stands for an accredited realism. That is to say, while Ravi Varma's adaptations that range all the way from iconic portraits to narrative allegories fit better as nineteenth-century salon paintings, the circular logic

popular, appealing to colonial officials and other Orientalists, Indian elites and nationalists, and also the growing middle classes. Orientalists praised Ravi Varma as the non-European who had mastered academic art and had successfully applied the Western academic style to Indian themes. At the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893, where Ravi Varma had been chosen to represent India, Varma received two awards from the Western judges. One award recognized that Varma's paintings were "true to nature in form and colour" while the other recognized the "ethnological value" of his paintings.[25] The ten paintings that Varma had submitted for the exhibition depicted women from different parts of India, and highlighted their different styles of dress and physiognomies. Featured were upper-caste women from Kerala, a Muslim woman in the zenana, a Parsi bride, a Maratha girl, South Indian gypsy women and Brahmin women, and a Bombay nautch girl.[26] Whereas Orientalists appreciated the ethnological value of these paintings, nationalists interpreted them as a statement on national unity in diversity, and praised Ravi Varma for his great contribution to the project of nation building. In a tribute to Ravi Varma after his death in 1906, Ramananda Chatterjee wrote in *The Modern Review* in 1907:

> With the exception of his style, every thing else in his pictures is Indian. But his foreign style, as far as we have been able to observe, does not detract from the usefulness of his paintings as sources of enjoyment and instruction or as an influence that makes for nationality. From the Himalayas to Cape Camorin, however much our languages, dress, manners and customs may differ, the social organisation and national character are much the same everywhere. This is due to no small extent to the influence of our national epics, the *Ramayana* and the

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persists and they are seen to promote this much-regarded realism." See also Christopher Pinney, "Indian Magical Realism: Notes on Popular Visual Culture," in G. Bhadra, G. Prakash, and S. Tharu, eds., *Subaltern Studies X* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 201-233.

[25] See Partha Mitter, "The Artist as Charismatic Individual: Raja Ravi Varma" in *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 198-199; Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, op. cit., 32.

[26] See Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, op. cit., 31; also Geeta Kapur, "Representational Dilemmas," op. cit., 161-164.

> *Mahabharata*. Ravi Varma's pictures taken from these epics appeal to all Hindus, at any rate, throughout India.[27]

For Orientalists and nationalists alike, then, it was not only Ravi Varma's novel combination of Western academic style and Indian themes that made his paintings so appealing, but also the particular way that he visually mapped Indian identity onto the female body.[28]

Ravi Varma's paintings also appealed to the growing middle classes. In 1890, after he had finished a series of fourteen "historical" paintings on epic themes[29] that had been commissioned by the Gaekwad of Baroda, the paintings were displayed so that the public could view them. Describing this exhibition, a biographer of Ravi Varma wrote in 1903:

> They were publicly exposed for some days and immense crowds of people assembled from all parts of the Bombay Presidency to see the paintings. They produced quite a sensation for a period, for it was the first time that subjects from the great Indian epics had been depicted on canvas so truthfully and touchingly. Hundreds and thousands of their photographs were sold all over India.[30]

Indeed, there was such a demand for Ravi Varma's "truthful and touching" images of Indian deities and heroes among the middle classes that Ravi Varma, together with his brother C. Raja Raja Varma, founded the Ravi Varma Lithographic Press in 1894. Ten years earlier, Sir T. Madhava Rao had first planted the seed for the

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[27] Ramananda Chatterjee, "Ravi Varma," *The Modern Review*, vol. I, Jan. 1907; reprinted as Appendix I in R.C. Sharma, ed., *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives*, op. cit., 146.

[28] Geeta Kapur discusses this point with particular reference to Ravi Varma's painting *A Galaxy (of Musicians)*, which features an ensemble of eleven female musicians from various regions of India. See her "Representational Dilemmas," op. cit., 167-175. For an interesting discussion of the marginalization of males in Ravi Varma's paintings, see R. Nandakumar, "The Missing Male: The Female Figures of Ravi Varma and the Concepts of Family, Marriage and Fatherhood in Nineteenth Century Kerala," *South Indian Studies*, vol. 1 (Jan. 1996), 54-82.

[29] These fourteen paintings are often described as "historical," for like the paintings of European history painters, they feature a combination of melodrama and moral lessons in order to "embellish and impress the truth." As many scholars have noted, with Varma the line between history and myth was thinly drawn. See Mitter, "The Artist as Charismatic Individual," op. cit., 201-204.

[30] Anonymous, *Ravi Varma: The Indian Artist*, op. cit., 10-11.

lithographic press when he encouraged Ravi Varma to send some of his works to Europe to have them oleographed in order to better meet the demand for them, writing to him: "You will thereby not only extend your reputation, but will be doing a real service to the country."[31] From this time forward Varma's interest in lithography grew, as did his belief that the act of founding his own lithographic press was a patriotic one.

The lithographic images that were most popular with the modernizing middle classes were images of the Hindu deities that could be used in their private puja rooms. These puja rooms were new additions to the domestic architecture and played a significant role in the construction of "Hinduism" that occurred in the nineteenth century. Vasudha Dalmia has examined the ways in which many strands of religion came to be subsumed under the collective category *sanatana dharma* that was Vaishnava at its core in the second half of the nineteenth century. Focusing on the figure of Bharatendu Harischandra (1850-85), the premier literary figure in Banaras of his time, she examines how his Hindi journals were central to the emergence of Hindi literature, the development of Hindi as a literary language, and the construction of Vaishnavism as "the only real religion of the Hindus."[32] Although Dalmia focuses on the articulation of a modern Hindu identity through written texts, this identity was simultaneously being articulated through printed images.[33] Throughout the process of the consolidation of North Indian Vaishnavism into "Hinduism" that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mass picture production was emerging, influenced by both Orientalist and Indian nationalist aesthetics, featuring a realistic iconography that transformed the

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[31] Cited by Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, op. cit., 24.

[32] Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harischandra and Nineteenth-century Banaras* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[33] Kajri Jain, "The Efficacious Image: Pictures and Power in Indian Mass Culture," *Polygraph*, no. 12 (2000), 170. Jain notes that printed images were being circulated across India in the late nineteenth century by Vaishnava picture merchants from the northern trading communities.

appearance of the prevailing religious imagery and a content drawn primarily from the Sanskrit epics.[34] And Ravi Varma's paintings were at the heart of this process. As "Hinduism" gained ground through the diffusion of the imagery and symbols of Purāṇic lore and the personalized deities of the Brahmanic pantheon, Ravi Varma's lithographic prints quickly found their way into the new puja rooms of the middle classes throughout India.[35] Describing these lithographs, Ravi Varma's biographer E.M.J. Venniyoor writes:

> The first picture to come out of the Ravi Varma press was *The Birth of Sakuntala*. The choice of subject to mark the birth of the press would seem to have symbolic overtones, the promise of the finest concepts in India's heritage, its religion, mythology and traditions. *Saraswati* and *Mahalakshmi* followed, and these found their way into the *puja* rooms of Hindu households immediately. […] To meet the demands of every Hindu sect, Ravi Varma painted every one of their gods – Krishna, Vishnu, Siva, Ganapati, Gouri, Kali, the various *avatars* or incarnations of Vishnu, Sesha-Sayi, Sesha-Narayana, Dattatreya, Indra and Parasurama…[36]

Like Venniyoor, I too am inclined to view the choice of *The Birth of Shakuntala* for the first lithographic print as a highly symbolic one. Orientalists had been enamored with the story of this classical heroine since 1789, when the first English translation of Kalidasa's play was made available by Sir William Jones.[37] Jones's English translation of the play was quickly translated into most European languages, including French, Italian, and German, and inspired new editions and translations in each decade of the

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[34] See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Artists, Artisans and Mass Picture Production in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Calcutta: The Changing Iconography of Popular Prints," *South Asia Research* 8.1 (May 1988), 3-45; and "Orientalism, Nationalism and the Reconstruction of 'Indian' Art in Calcutta," in C. Asher and T. Metcalf, eds., *Perceptions of South Asia's Visual Past* (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH, 1994), 47-65.

[35] R. Nandakumar, "Raja Ravi Varma in the Realm of the Public," *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 27-28 (Mar. 1995), 44. See also Anuradha Kapur, "The Representation of Gods and Heroes: Parsi Mythological Drama of the Early Twentieth Century," *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 23-24 (Jan. 1993), 104. She notes that in addition to the new popularity of Ravi Varma's lithographic images amongst the middle classes, photographs of Parsi theatre actors who played the parts of gods, such as Bhogilal playing Shri Krishna, were also purchased to hang in middle class homes from the beginning of the twentieth century.

[36] Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, op. cit., 38-39. Significantly, *Birth of Shakuntala* received the "best lithograph" prize in 1895 at the Bombay Art Society's Annual Exhibition.

[37] Sir William Jones, *Sacontala, or The Fatal Ring* (London, 1789). For a discussion of how Victorian morality affected Jones's translation as well as later ones, see Garland Cannon and Siddheshwar Pandey, "Sir William Jones Revisited: On His Translation of the Shakuntala," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 96, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1976).

nineteenth century.[38] In 1855, Sir M. Monier Williams published another English translation of Kalidasa's play, this one in free verse. He viewed the play as a product of "the golden age" of Indian civilization, calling it "the most celebrated drama of the great Indian Shakspere [sic]," Kalidasa, who was one of the famous "Nine Gems" that had adorned King Vikramaditya's court.[39] Discussing the merits of this and other classical Indian plays, Monier Williams wrote:

> [W]hen to the antiquity of these productions is added their extreme beauty and excellence as literary compositions, and when we also take into account their value as representations of the early condition of Hindu society – which, not withstanding the lapse of two thousand years, has in many particulars obeyed the law of unchangeableness ever stamped on the manners and customs of the East – we are led to wonder that the study of the Indian drama has not commended itself in a greater degree to the attention of Europeans, and especially of Englishmen. The English student, at least, is bound by considerations of duty, as well as curiosity, to make himself acquainted with a subject which illustrates and explains the condition of the millions of Hindus who owe allegiance to his own Sovereign and are governed by English laws.[40]

Monier Williams thus felt that his new translation of the classical play *Abhijñāna-śākuntalam* would help the British to better understand their present subjects, and thereby better rule them. However, as Orientalists increasingly felt the need to justify the

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[38] See Romila Thapar, "Translations: Orientalism, German Romanticism and the Image of Sakuntala," in *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*, op. cit., 197-217; also M. Schuyler, "The Editions and Translations of Shakuntala," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 22 (1901), 237-248.

[39] The dates of the "golden age" of Indian civilization and the life of the poet Kalidasa have shifted over time, but the two always remain intertwined. In the introduction to the first edition of his translation, Monier Williams wrote: "This great monarch [Vikramaditya] succeeded in driving back the barbaric hordes [the "Tartars or Scythians"] beyond the Indus, and so consolidated his empire that his dominion extended over the whole of Northern Hindustan… There is good authority for affirming that the reign of Vikramaditya I was equal in brilliancy to that of any monarch in any age or country. He was a liberal patron of science and literature, and gave the most splendid encouragement to poets, philologists, astronomers, and mathematicians. Nine illustrious men of genius adorned his court, and were supported by his bounty. They were called the 'Nine Gems;' and Kalidasa is by general consent allowed to have been the brightest of the nine." Sir M. Monier Williams, *Sakoontala, or The Lost Ring* (London, 1855), viii. By the time that the eighth edition of this translation was published in 1898, however, Monier Williams had come to the conclusion that there was no evidence to support the above argument, and that dating Kalidasa to the mid-third century C.E. "was not far wrong." Sir M. Monier Williams, *Sakoontala, or The Lost Ring*, eighth edition (London, 1898), xvi-xvii.

[40] M. Monier Williams, *Sakoontala*, first edition, op. cit., vii; also see p. xi.

colonial presence in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the notion of a timeless India was steadily replaced in colonial discourse with a new emphasis on the degeneracy of contemporary Indian society in contrast with the glory of ancient Indian civilization as found in the Vedas, the epics, and other classical texts – and the status of Indian women, past and present, was central to this contrast. Purdah, child marriage, polygamy, and sati were among the customs most commonly cited as evidence of the abject status of women in modern India[41]; while epic heroines such as Shakuntala, Savitri, and Damayanti, as well as Upaniṣadic characters such as Gargi and Maitreyi, were held up as examples of what Indian women had once been: educated, cultured, spiritual wives and mothers.[42]

At this same time, the notion of the "Aryan" was gaining prominence in Orientalist scholarship, resulting in the consolidation of the idea of the golden age of Indian civilization, so that it became not just a Hindu golden age, but an Aryan one as well.[43] In this discourse, Shakuntala and other classical heroines who were understood to represent the normative model of Indian womanhood were recast as Aryan women.[44] Romila Thapar has argued that as enthusiasm for Romanticism faded in the second half of the nineteenth century and "race science" grew, a new interpretation of Shakuntala arose: she was no longer seen as the child of nature, but instead became the "rustic maiden" who embodied the female virtues of modesty, chastity, self-sacrifice, devotion

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[41] See Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on *Sati* in Colonial India," in K. Sangari and S. Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 88-126; Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Issues of Widowhood: Gender and Resistance in Colonial Western India" in Haynes and Prakash (eds.), *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 62-108.

[42] See Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past," in K. Sangari and S. Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 46.

[43] The eminent Sanskritists Sir William Jones and Sir Monier Williams were both influential figures in this process. See Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[44] Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*?," op. cit., 61.

and patience – all proper Victorian virtues that Aryan women of modern Europe and classical India held in common, but that the racially inferior native women of contemporary India no longer did.[45]

In the 1870s, Ravi Varma began to add narrative paintings to his repertoire, drawing upon India's classical heritage as it was then being defined – the epics, the Purāṇas, and the plays of Kalidasa – for his inspiration. The first of these paintings was his *Shakuntala Patralekhan* (*Shakuntala Writing a Love Letter to Dushyanta*), which he painted for the 1876 Madras exhibition.[46] This painting not only won a gold medal, it also brought Varma widespread recognition for his unique combination of Western academic style and traditional Indian subject matter. The Duke of Buckingham, then governor of Madras, purchased the painting immediately upon viewing it at the Madras exhibition. Due to the widespread interest in the story of Shakuntala in colonial circles at the time, Varma was urged to create additional versions of his painting.[47] One of these later paintings of Shakuntala was used by Monier Williams as the frontispiece to the fifth edition of his translation of Kalidasa's play when it was printed in 1887 **[Fig. 3.8]**.[48]

The location of ideal Indian womanhood within the past "golden age" of Hinduism as posited by Orientalists was also accepted by Hindu liberals and

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[45] Romila Thapar, "Sakuntala: Histories of a Narrative," in *Narratives and the Making of History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17-20. At this time, many proponents of race science argued that the colonized "natives," although originally of Aryan stock, were racially inferior because of the long history of blood mixing between Aryans and Dravidians in the subcontinent from the classical period to the modern day. See Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, op. cit., esp. pp. 165-216. For a look at how this theory persisted in India well into the twentieth century, see A.S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization, from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day* (Benaras: Culture Publications House, Benaras Hindu University, 1938), which has been reprinted many times.

[46] The location of the original is unknown; however, this painting was widely reproduced (it is the frontispiece to Anonymous, *Ravi Varma: The Indian Artist*, op. cit.) and was made available as an oleograph as well.

[47] In addition to *Shakuntala Patralekhan*, other Shakuntala paintings by Varma include *Shakuntala* (ca. 1888, Maharaja Fatehsingh Museum Trust, Laxmi Vilas Palace, Baroda); *Shakuntala* (1898, Government Museum, Madras); and *Shakuntala Looks Back in Love* (1898, Shri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum).

[48] M. Monier Williams, *Sakoontala, or The Lost Ring*, fifth edition (London, 1887).

conservatives alike. The qualities associated with the term "Aryan" in Orientalist scholarship – not just race, but also such positive attributes as vigor, spirituality, and above all, highly cultured and free women – appealed to nationalists as well. Thus in the debates between liberals and conservatives on the status of women both sides generally agreed that Hindu women had fallen to occupy a degraded position in contemporary society; their conflict arose over the question of how best to achieve the resumption of women's former glory and over the interpretation of what that glory actually entailed. Hence while conservatives held up Shakuntala and Savitri as "traditional" role models of chaste, spiritual Hindu women who performed their wifely duties within the realm of the household, social reformers held up the same figures as models of "modern" women who were educated, free, and chose their own partners in marriage as adults.[49] Eventually, Shakuntala came into such prominence as an ideal Indian woman that she was contrasted not only with contemporary Indian women, but with the women of other nations as well. Rabindranath Tagore, for instance, favorably compared Kalidasa's Shakuntala with Shakespeare's Miranda of *The Tempest*, arguing that the Indian model of femininity was better than the English one, for whereas Miranda's purity is based on ignorance and inexperience, Shakuntala's purity has ripened through experience and restraint and delivered her into wifehood and motherhood.[50]

For these reasons, Ravi Varma's Shakuntala paintings were as well received by nationalists as by Orientalists in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Balendranath

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[49] See Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*?," op. cit., 27-87; Susie Tharu, "Tracing Savitri's Pedigree: Victorian Racism and the Image of Women in Indo-Anglian Literature," in K. Sangari and S. Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 254-268.

[50] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Sakuntala*: Its Inner Meaning," first published in Bengali in 1907, then translated into English by Jadunath Sarkar for *The Modern Review*; reprinted in Romila Thapar's *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*, op. cit., 244-248. See also William Radice, "Tagore and Kalidasa," *South Asia Research*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996), esp. p. 56.

Tagore wrote in the Tagore family journal *Sadhana* (1891-92) that the vivid "word pictures" evoked in the passages of Kalidasa's *Abhijñāna-śākuntalam* seemed to be waiting to be translated into pictorial form, and that the unique success and significance of Ravi Varma in modern India was due to the fact that he had succeeded in giving the "right" visual form to these classical literary subjects.[51] In 1888 and again in 1894, Ravi Varma embarked upon tours of India, visiting various cities and filling up sketchbooks in an effort to study the basic unity that he was convinced underpinned the diversity of India. He was particularly concerned to identify a female type from amongst this variety in terms of costume, style, and physiognomy. The result of the tours was that Varma chose the sari as the best dress in which to drape his heroines; rejected the "conventional style" of miniature painting in favor of Western academic style (as seen, for instance, in the works of Rembrandt); and assumed, perhaps unconsciously, an Aryan basis for his heroines' physiognomy.[52] Together, these were some of the elements that, in Balendranath's words, gave the "right" visual form at the time to Varma's Shakuntala and his other heroines.

As translations of Kalidasa's Sanskrit play into regional languages began to be published and staged in the latter half of the nineteenth century, there was much cross-fertilization between painting and the theatre, due in part to the push towards "realism" in the rendering of classical Indian themes that occurred in both mediums at this time. Ravi Varma was a fan of the theatre, and is known to have attended Anna Sahib Kirloskar's

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[51] Cited by Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Visualizing the Nation," op. cit., 18-19.

[52] Ravi Varma's painting *Ravana Slaying Jatayu* (1906) provides a good illustration of this point. Sita is the fair-skinned, sari-draped heroine, while her abductor, Ravana, is clearly marked as the antihero by his dark skin, among other features. On Ravi Varma's tours, see Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, op. cit., 27 and 34, and Partha Mitter, "The Artist as Charismatic Individual," op. cit., 201-202. On the "Aryan" physiognomy of Varma's heroines, see Geeta Kapur, "Representational Dilemmas," op. cit., 163, and Patricia Uberoi, "Feminine Identity," op. cit., WS44. On how Varma's "aryanized depictions" persist in calendar art in postcolonial India, see Kajri Jain, "Of the Everyday and the 'National Pencil'," op. cit., 75.

Marathi version of *Shakuntala* that was staged in Bombay in the 1890s. Deepak Kannal notes that although there is no specific evidence to suggest that Varma's later paintings of Shakuntala were inspired by this performance, it may not be coincidental that there is a marked choreographic similarity between scenes in the play and the same scenes in several of his paintings.[53] Indeed, many elements of theatricality can be found in Ravi Varma's paintings: the use of stage curtains; the emphasis on head-dresses and other ornaments and jewelry; fancy-dress costumes; the postures and gestures of figures; and the use of formal stage settings in paintings such as *Draupadi at the Court of Virat* and *Victory to Indrajit*.[54]

But this theatricality was foremost among the faults found in Ravi Varma's paintings when a new aesthetic promoted by the Bengal School of Art began to rival Ravi Varma's own over the claim to "Indianness" in the early twentieth century. Ravi Varma had looked to Western realist paintings as well as Western popular imagery – including dramatic photographs of the "tableaux vivant" genre and lithographic prints of paintings and photos – for the stylistic inspiration behind his Indian-themed paintings, forging a "modern" Indian aesthetic. But at the dawn of the twentieth century, a group of art scholars and artists began to publicly denounce that modernity, rejecting it in favor of a "traditional" Indian aesthetic that called upon the East, rather than the West, for both its style guidelines and its content.[55] Ananda Coomaraswamy, a leading Indian art scholar, had this to say about Ravi Varma in 1907:

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[53] Deepak Kannal, "Ravi Varma and the Marathi Aesthetic," in R. Parimoo, ed., *The Legacy of Raja Ravi Varma*, op. cit., 36-37.

[54] See Suresh Awasthi, "Theatrical Connections with Ravi Varma's Paintings," in R.C. Sharma, ed., *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives*, op. cit., 110-114; Partha Mitter, "The Artist as Charismatic Individual," op. cit., 207; Geeta Kapur, "Representational Dilemmas," op. cit., 155-159.

[55] I have put the terms "modern" and "traditional" in quotes here because both Indian aesthetics, of course, were newly articulated products of colonial modernity. On these rivaling claims to "Indianness" in art, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "The Contest Over Tradition and Nationalism: Differing Aesthetic Formulations for

> Theatrical conceptions, want of imagination, and lack of Indian feeling in the treatment of sacred and epic Indian subjects, are Ravi Varma's fatal faults. No offence can be greater than the treatment of serious or epic subjects without dignity; and Ravi Varma's gods and heroes are men cast in a very common mould, who find themselves in situations for which they have not a proper capacity.[56]

In a similar vein, E.B. Havell, Principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta from 1896-1905, critiqued Varma's application of "common realistic trickery" to Indian subjects, which he felt demonstrated "a most painful lack of the poetic faculty in illustrating the most imaginative Indian poetry and allegory."[57] Interested in locating a plane of "high" Indian art that was distinct from both Western art and common or even "low" art forms in India, Havell and Coomaraswamy were particularly disturbed by the use of illusionist realism in Ravi Varma's mythological paintings, and by the enthusiasm with which this usage was then being met in various media. In the Parsi theatre, for instance, the inner stage curtains were done up in a popular mode that was in line with the realism of Ravi Varma: the architecture, furniture, plants, trees, birds and animals painted on to them had a likeness to the real thing and thus functioned to make the "gods" who appeared before them all the more tangible.[58] But it was the use of the modern technology of lithography that was perhaps most disturbing for critics like Havell and Coomaraswamy, for it contributed to the withering of the "aura" of the unique work of "high art" by delivering it to the masses, thereby further increasing the tangibility of the deities depicted therein by allowing the masses to touch and even possess them.[59]

'Indian' Painting," in *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 185-225.

[56] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Present State of Indian Art," *The Modern Review*, Aug. 1907, reprinted as Appendix III in R.C. Sharma, ed., *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives*, op. cit., 154-155.

[57] E.B. Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (London: John Murray, 1908), 252.

[58] Anuradha Kapur, "The Representation of Gods and Heroes," op. cit., 98-104.

[59] On the withering of the "aura" of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, see Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217-251.

Through this tangibility, the Hindu gods and goddesses became almost human, allowing the viewer – in the case of lithographic prints, the urban masses – to identify with and idealize them. In Anuradha Kapur's words, "idealization is possible because it is possible to identify with the gods and heroes, and identification is possible because the mode of representation – the discourse of realism – places the figures in time and space which is secular and contiguous with our own."[60]

Disturbed by such blatant and ubiquitous resacralization, Coomaraswamy alleged that Ravi Varma's gods and goddesses, by their association with real life models, had fallen from their divine status.[61] In agreement with this opinion, Sister Nivedita, another proponent of the Bengal School of Art, criticized Ravi Varma's *Shakuntala-Patralekhan* painting for portraying this mythological heroine as a mere common woman, and an ill-bred one at that:

> Not every scene is fit for a picture. And this truth needs emphasising in modern India especially, because here an erroneous conception of fashion has gone far to play havoc with the taste of the people. In a country in which that posture is held to be ill-bred every home contains a picture of a fat young woman lying full length on the floor writing a letter on a lotus leaf! As if a sight that would outrage decorum in actuality, could be beautiful in imagination![62]

Yet despite such criticism by these proponents of "traditional" Indian art as practiced by the Bengal School and the virtual dismissal of Ravi Varma in "high art" circles ever since 1900, Varma's paintings have nonetheless had a lasting impact on the public sphere – particularly his depiction of the feminine ideal through his paintings of

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[60] Anuradha Kapur, "The Representation of Gods and Heroes," op. cit., 97.

[61] Ravi Varma used live models when available, and also made use of photographs. At times female models, in particular, were difficult to come by, and those that were available were often actresses, singers, dancers, or even prostitutes. One of Ravi Varma's Shakuntala paintings is said to have been modeled on a Parsi actress of Ravi Varma's acquaintance who agreed to pose for the portrayal. See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "The Contest Over Tradition and Nationalism," op. cit., 187; Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, op. cit., 49; Geeta Kapur, "Representational Dilemmas," op. cit., 152 and 157; Partha Mitter, "The Artist as Charismatic Individual," op. cit., 197-198.

[62] Nivedita, "The Function of Art in Shaping Nationality," *The Modern Review*, Feb. 1907, reprinted as Appendix II in R.C. Sharma, ed., *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives*, op. cit., 150.

Shakuntala and other mythological heroines.[63] Indeed, Partha Mitter notes that it was the concrete presentation of Shakuntala – the depiction of her as "a pretty young Kerala girl lying on the ground, writing a love letter" – that was so appealing, because it was such a break from the generalized emotion of traditional painting.[64]

In the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books, Ravi Varma's theatrical influence can be felt in many ways: in the extensive use of head-dresses, heavy gold ornamentation, and fancy-dress costumes; in the posed stances of the heroes and heroines; and even in the occasional use of stage settings. The *Nala Damayanti* issue, for instance, begins with a splash page that is strong on theatricality **[Fig. 3.9]**. Nala sits on his throne, crowned and bedecked in jewelry, striking a pose that is meant to convey the depth of his sadness. Two female servants stand behind the throne, fanning the king in front of a large, red curtain. In the palace scenarios in *Shakuntala* and other titles, as well, this theatricality is readily apparent. More importantly for our purposes, the *Shakuntala* issue also evidences Ravi Varma's influence in its depiction of the heroine as an idealized yet realistic or "concrete" girl: a beautiful but shy woman who lounges against a tree in the forest, writing a love letter to a king who she fears will never notice her since she is "only a poor village girl."[65]

Varma's impact in the larger public sphere can be witnessed in the career of the actor Bal Gandharva (aka Narayan Shripad Rajhans, 1888-1967). Bal Gandharva was a

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[63] It is important to point out that even after Ravi Varma had been discredited by the proponents of the Bengal School of Art, it was still the emphasis on the feminine ideal that works of art were judged by. Discussing the Bengal School of Art, Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes: "Indian (implying, inevitably, Hindu) women were now marked out as the supreme embodiment of tradition: the spiritual Other of the Modern West. Pictures such as Abanindranath's image of 'Sita in captivity in Lanka', or Nandalal's painting of 'Sati' (Sita's ordeal in the fire, to test her purity and chastity) were said to symbolise a glorious ideal of Hindu womanhood which stood at the heart of India's cultural heritage." See her "The Contest Over Tradition and Nationalism," op. cit., 191.

[64] Partha Mitter, "The Artist as Charismatic Individual," op. cit., 202.

[65] *Shakuntala*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 12, op. cit., 8. Refer to Fig. 3.2.

female impersonator, one of the male actors who played female roles in the Marathi theatre due to the proscription of female actresses that lasted into the first few decades of the twentieth century.[66] Gandharva joined the Kirloskar Drama Company in Bombay in 1905, and made his debut in the title role in the Marathi rendering of "Shakuntala." Immensely successful as a female impersonator, he was regarded as the standard of beauty, elegance, and refinement during his day, and set the fashions for middle-class women's dress and behavior.[67] Significantly, the costumes, gestures, and stances of Gandharva's characters hold much in common with those of the women in Varma's paintings.[68] A photograph of Bal Gandharva in character as Shakuntala reveals the overlap between the actor's female impersonation and Ravi Varma's feminine ideal, as seen, for instance, in his painting *Arjuna and Subhadra*.[69] In the photograph, Bal Gandharva has perfectly imitated the stance and gesture of the heroine Subhadra as she was rendered by Varma. Gandharva's body is turned away coquettishly and his head is bent in submission, while his hand reaches out to the hero, in a gesture of partial restraint and partial encouragement. The folds of his sari, his bejeweled ears and neck, and the flowers encircling his hair bun all appear to be closely modeled on Subhadra and other classical heroines as they had been previously envisioned by Varma. Similarly, the

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[66] On the history of female impersonators and actresses on the stage, see Kathryn Hansen, "Stri Bhumika: Female Impersonators and Actresses on the Parsi Stage," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 33, no. 35 (Aug. 29-Sept. 4, 1998), 2291-2300; and Neera Adarkar, "In Search of Women in History of Marathi Theatre, 1843-1933," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 26, no. 43 (Oct. 26, 1991), WS87-WS90. On Bal Gandharva, see the biography by Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni, *Balgandharva and the Marathi Theatre* (Bombay: Roopak Books, 1988).

[67] Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni notes that the imitation of Bal Gandharva by contemporary middle-class women encompassed even the little strings of flowers with which ladies adorn their hair and the handkerchiefs of gossamer fabric which they carry coquettishly in their hands. See his *Balgandharva and the Marathi Theatre*, ibid., 59.

[68] This has been noted by Deepak Kannal, "Ravi Varma and the Marathi Aesthetic," op. cit., 37-38; Kathryn Hansen, "Stri Bhumika," op. cit., 2296; and Geeta Kapur, "Representational Dilemmas," op. cit., 167.

[69] The photograph of Bal Gandharva as Shakuntala can be seen in Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni, his *Balgandharva and the Marathi Theatre*, op. cit.

Shakuntala on the cover of the comic book shares the same bent head and downcast eyes, the same bejeweled ears and neck, and the same flowers encircling the bun in her hair. And within the pages of the comic book, she also shares the same posture of partial restraint and partial encouragement when in the presence of the king **[Fig. 3.10]**.

In addition to shared costumes, gestures, and stances, Ravi Varma's paintings of heroines and Bal Gandharva's impersonations of those heroines were also alike in their combination of narrative and iconic elements. Like the Western "tableaux vivant" photographs that inspired him, Varma's paintings of mythological women are narratives that have been frozen at a dramatic moment, a moment that has been chosen so as to allow the male gaze to linger on the feminine image. Discussing Ravi Varma's painting *Shakuntala Looks Back at Dushyanta*, in which Shakuntala glances back at her lover under the pretext of picking a thorn from her foot, Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes:

> [T]his very gesture – the twist and turn of head and body – draws the viewer into the narrative, inviting one to place this scene within an imagined sequence of images and events. On its own, the painting stands like a frozen tableau (like a still from a moving film), plucked out of an on-running spectacle of episodes. These paintings also reflect the centrality of the 'male gaze' in defining the feminine image. Though absent from the pictorial frame, the male lover forms a pivotal point of reference, his gaze transfixes Shakuntala, as also Damayanti, into 'desired' images, casting them as lyrical and sensual ideals.[70]

Such images simultaneously cast the woman as a classical heroine and as a sensuous ideal, encompassing both the sacred and the secular. To repeat an oft-cited quote, in these paintings "goddesses are luscious women, and luscious women goddesses."[71]

This technique of the frozen moment was also used in the theatre. Bal Gandharva and other actors would pause the continuous story while striking a pose on stage at dramatic points in order to allow the audience time for a double take. In this way the

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[70] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Women as 'Calendar Art' Icons," op. cit., WS94.
[71] Patricia Uberoi, "Feminine Identity," op. cit., WS44.

narrative was regularly interrupted with iconic, frontal presentations.[72] This technique was employed in the early Indian cinema as well, incorporated by the first Indian film director, D.G. Phalke.

Dhundiraj Govind ("Dadasaheb") Phalke (1870-1944) is famous as the creator of the first Indian film, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913). Prior to producing films, however, Phalke dabbled in other newly available visual media technologies. As a student at the Kala Bhavan art school in Baroda he bought his first still-life camera in 1890. He then went to Ratlam where he learned the three-color blockmaking, photolithography, and darkroom printing techniques. He painted set designs for the theatre, ran his own portrait photography studio, and even became a trained magician. In 1905, Phalke went to Lonavala where he made photolitho transfers of Ravi Varma's oleographs for the Ravi Varma Press. He was so successful that he was awarded a medal at a Bombay exhibition and then established his own Phalke's Engraving and Printing Works (later called the Laxmi Arts Printing Press).[73] Phalke first became interested in film in 1910-11 after he saw the film *Life of Christ* at the America-India Picture Palace in Bombay. It was this film that inspired Phalke to use this new technology to bring images of the Hindu gods to life: "While the life of Christ was rolling fast before my eyes I was mentally visualising the Gods, Shri Krishna, Shri Ramchandra, their Gokul and Ayodhya… Could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen?"[74]

Like Ravi Varma, Phalke too worked with the famed genre of the mythological in order to define "Indianness." Despite using the new medium of film, a technology

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[72] Anuradha Kapur discusses this with regard to the frontal relationship established between the actor as a mythological being and the viewers in the Parsi theatre. See her "The Representation of Gods and Heroes," op. cit., 92-93.

[73] Juhi Saklani, "The Magic Lantern Man," *The India Magazine of Her People and Culture* (Mar. 1998), 7-13; Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 164-165.

[74] Cited in Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Phalke Era," op. cit., 49.

recently arrived from the West, he located this Indianness in both the production process and the images he created, claiming: "My films are *swadeshi* in the sense that the ownership, employees and stories are *swadeshi*."[75] The images that Phalke created were heavily influenced by Ravi Varma's frozen narrative paintings and the technique of the frozen moment used in the theatre. Ashish Rajadhyaksha has argued that Phalke's work realized a distinct gaze for his audience, one that mediated the opposition between "Indian images" and "industrial technology" and their pressures towards static and mobilized images, respectively, by pulling towards the purely specular frontal aspect of the image and yet also amplifying the images to bring them alive.[76] For instance, in his *Shri Krishna Janma* (1918) purely frontal and iconic shots of Krishna are repeatedly alternated with action shots, to the extent that strict dramatic continuity is sacrificed.[77]

Phalke made over forty silent films between 1913 and 1937. Unfortunately, only thirteen of over one thousand silent films made in India have survived, and very little footage remains of Phalke's work, hence it is difficult to examine Phalke's portrayal of the feminine ideal in depth.[78] Yet through newspaper advertisements placed by Phalke we know that he sought "handsome faces"[79] for films, and that he was disappointed when only "ugly, lacklustre or deformed" persons from the red light district turned up for the female roles[80]: "Imagine their vulgar mannerisms, half exposed breasts and swaying hips as Sita or Draupadi."[81] Although he appealed to "inwardly beautiful" women from "good

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[75] Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Phalke Era," ibid., 66.
[76] Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Phalke Era," ibid., 68-69.
[77] See Ashish Rajadhyaksha's breakdown of the first twelve shots of this film in his "The Phalke Era," ibid., 72-74.
[78] On the extant reels of Phalke's films and other silent films, see P.K. Nair, "Silent Films in the Archive," *Cinema Vision India*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1980), 104-113.
[79] B.V. Dharap and Narmada Shahane, "Birth of a Film Industry," *Cinema Vision India*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1980), 18.
[80] Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema (1947-1987)* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 39.
[81] Cited by Juhi Saklani, "The Magic Lantern Man," op. cit., 12.

families,"[82] few volunteered. Phalke's wife and daughter acted in some of his early films, and he resorted to female impersonators for the female roles in many others.[83]

Further evidence of the spread of the Ravi Varma aesthetic into Indian cinema through the films of D.G. Phalke and others can be found in the new medium of film posters and booklets that began to emerge in the 1920s. Discussing these new advertisements, Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel state that:

> The starting point for this new ocular era was the imagery created by Phalke in his films produced between 1913 and 1937, projecting a strong visual aesthetic that was to have a lasting influence on Indian cinema and was itself subject to many influences, the most significant of which was the painter Ravi Varma.[84]

This shared aesthetic style can be seen when the booklet cover for Phalke's film *Setu-Bandhan* (*Bridging the Ocean*, 1932) is compared with Varma's earlier painting *Sethubandhanam* (*Rama Humbling the Seas*, 1906).[85] Both of these images of the god Rama break with earlier two-dimensional, iconic images of Rama in which he is depicted according to traditional iconographic standards in *tribhanga* pose, flanked by Sita on his right, Lakshman on his left, and Hanuman kneeling in the foreground. Varma's and Phalke's uses of realism and narrative in their depictions of Rama lend the deity a new substance through his muscle, weaponry, and emotion, and by making the deity so tangible, so real, they deliver the mythical past into the present.[86]

But the visualization of the female form remains the site where Ravi Varma made the greatest impact. Varma's images of women were so popular that during his own

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[82] Juhi Saklani, "The Magic Lantern Man," ibid.

[83] On the difficulties experienced by one of the first female film actresses in India, Ramalabai Gokhale, who played the part of Mohini in Phalke's *Bhasmasur Mohini* (1914), see Satish Bahadur and Shyamala Vanarase, "The Personal and Professional Problems of a Woman Performer," *Cinema Vision India*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1980), 22-25.

[84] Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India*, op. cit., 104-105.

[85] For these images, see Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India*, ibid., 107, and Partha Mitter, "The Artist as Charismatic Individual," op. cit., 183.

[86] See Anuradha Kapur, "Deity to Crusader: The Changing Iconography of Ram," in Gyanendra Pandey (ed.), *Hindus and Others: The Question of Identity in India Today* (New York: Viking, 1993), 74-109.

lifetime they were plagiarized by the owners of other lithographic presses. His images were also featured in advertising in India as well as abroad. One famous English baby food company even used *The Birth of Shakuntala* to advertise its baby food.[87] With the rise of stardom in the Indian film industry in the twentieth century, artists who designed film posters in the 1940s and 50s, such as S.M. Pandit, emphasized the physicality of the female form in such a way that they too transferred a sense of unearthly divinity to film stars and an earthly physicality to mythological subjects. For instance, the Varma aesthetic can be clearly seen in the booklet cover designed by S.M. Pandit for the film *Draupadi* (directed by Baburao Patel, 1940).[88]

The fair, voluptuous, sari-draped heroines and goddesses of Varma's oil paintings were thus first disseminated to the public through oleographs, and then through the theatre, photography, film, popular advertisements, and other media. Through these various media a publicly visible image of the "modern Indian woman" was constructed, one that complemented the image of the modern Indian woman being constructed by male novelists and socio-religious reformers in various textual media from the late nineteenth century forward. This ideal Indian woman could be identified through such external markers of femininity as her gestures and posture, jewelry and ornamentation, sari draping and hairstyle. And these external markers of femininity, once equated with the new visual template of mythological heroines such as Shakuntala, became equated with more internal markers of femininity: modesty, spirituality, and a self-sacrificing nature. The significance of this equation is that it was the combination of these internal and external markers of femininity that allowed the "spiritual" qualities of women to be publicly recognized, so that they could then enter into the public realm.[89]

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[87] See Partha Mitter, "The Artist as Charismatic Individual," op. cit., page 215 and figures XX and 131.
[88] For this image, see Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India*, op. cit., page 110 and illustration 53.
[89] Kathryn Hansen makes this valuable point in "Stri Bhumika," op. cit., esp. pp. 2296-2297.

THE FEMININE IDEAL IN *AMAR CHITRA KATHA*

From the covers of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books [refer to Figs. 3.1, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7], it is evident that the statement first made of Ravi Varma's paintings – that "goddesses are luscious women, and luscious women goddesses"[90] – applies equally to these comics. Ravi Varma's tremendous influence on *Amar Chitra Katha* is apparent not only in the form of these comic book images – through stylistic evidence such as the combination of realism and idealism and the use of the narrative mode – but also in the very content of the comic books. Ravi Varma's paintings of mythological and historical figures established a canon. The heroines that Varma painted, like Shakuntala and Damayanti, are the same heroines whose stories are told in *Amar Chitra Katha*.

The heroines of these comics therefore have much in common with the heroines of Varma's paintings, but one significant point of deviation between Varma's aesthetic and the comic books is that of costume: whereas Ravi Varma had consciously chosen the sari as the best dress to drape his heroines in, the heroines of the comics are consciously clad in far less. While on one of his tours of India to study and devise a national costume, Varma and his brother had visited the Karle caves near Pune. Varma was curious about the scanty clothing of the Buddhist figures there, but decided that such dress was not appropriate for his "proper" heroines from Sanskrit literature.[91] A century later, when Anant Pai "toured" classical Indian literature in search of references to costume, he came up with something other than the sari as the garment of choice for his comic book heroines. According to him:

> In the classical period men and women wore a lower garment, the "antariya." Women wore an upper garment, the "uttariya," too. And rich people, they wore a waist garment with details, colors. It is like what Bharat Natyam dancers wear today. This was called a "prapata," and on top of it the very rich would wear a

[90] Patricia Uberoi, "Feminine Identity," op. cit., WS44.
[91] Partha Mitter, "The Artist as Charismatic Individual," op. cit., 201-202.

> "rasna," a golden chain. And women also wore an unstitched garment. You know, to cover themselves on top. And there was also the "ushnisha" that was worn on the head when they went out. Men wore this too – men and women both.[92]

When I next asked Anant Pai how he knew that this is what was worn back then, he responded: "From the texts, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. For instance, we know from the *Mahabharata* that Draupadi said, 'I am only in one garment – how can I go before the assembly like this?' From such things we know how they dressed back then."[93]

Many others involved in the production of these comic books brought up the subject of costume during my conversations with them. Former associate editor Kamala Chandrakant stated that she focused on the consistency, continuity, and credibility of the comic books, while Mr. Pai focused on "artwork authenticity": "Mr. Anant Pai was very knowledgeable about period costume, hairstyles, headgear, weapons, and architecture, and scrutinizing the artworks for authenticity in these areas was entirely taken care of by him."[94] When asked about accuracy in his artwork, artist Pratap Mulick immediately brought up the subject of costume:

> We must stick to certain conclusions that Mr. Pai has reached, based on his reading of the Sanskrit texts. For instance, women's dress. Pai has researched and knows that women only wore a brassiere for their upper garment. Then they had a single lower piece, with a belt over it, and a small covering garment. And ornaments, lots of ornaments, including the belt. And men wore a dhoti, with no upper garment, and lots of ornaments too. And the houses too. Such things we must make as they are described in the Sanskrit text. But for the history comics it is different. For instance, Rana Pratap, or Shivaji. They wore different clothes. Even in the Shivaji paintings the clothes must be accurate.[95]

And former associate editor Subba Rao stated that because Mr. Pai was so particular about the accuracy of costume, the artists and editors at the comic book studio always referred to a book on ancient Indian dress by the art historian Moti Chandra that was kept

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[92] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 26, 2002.
[93] Anant Pai, ibid.
[94] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.
[95] Pratap Mulick, interviewed by the author in Pune, January 21, 2002.

in their research library.[96] In this book, *Costumes, Textiles, Cosmetics and Coiffure in Ancient and Mediaeval India* (1973), Moti Chandra surveys sculpture, coins, and texts from the Vedic period up through the twelfth century C.E. in an effort to appreciate the development of Indian costume over time. Summarizing the Vedic period, Chandra writes:

> The Vedic Indians wore three garments: *nivi* or loin-cloth sometimes having long and unwoven fringe, a garment *(vasas)* and an overgarment *(upavasana, adhivasa)* generally consisting of a wrapper or sometimes consisting of a jacket, bodice or cloak like *pratidhi, drapi* or *atka*. *Pesas* was worn by dancing girls and was the forefather of modern *peshwaz*. The *usnisa* or turban is met in later Vedic literature and was worn by the Rajas and Vratyas and also sometimes by women.[97]

This passage is very similar to Mr. Pai's discussion of clothing, although some of the terminology differs. But whereas Moti Chandra speaks of a variety of clothing styles in this book according to period and region, one style of women's clothing – significantly, purported to be from the Vedic period – has been used in the comic books from the classical period through the medieval period, and for mythological and historical heroines alike. Thus, less impaired by Victorian sensibilities than Ravi Varma, Anant Pai and his staff envisioned a modified costume for Indian women, one which was draped from the hips down much like the sari on Varma's heroines, but which revealed the comic book heroines' voluptuous curves even more.

This sartorial choice has received some criticism. For instance, journalist Sanjay Joshi wrote in *The Telegraph*:

> [W]hat is decidedly peculiar is their [*Amar Chitra Katha*'s] pictorial depiction of women. Considering that the main consumers of these comics are children, there seems little need for the many scantily clad and voluptuously drawn female figures which adorn their pages. In such a context this type of artwork appears

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[96] Subba Rao, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 5, 2002.

[97] Moti Chandra, *Costumes, Textiles, Cosmetics and Coiffure in Ancient and Mediaeval India* (Delhi, Oriental Publishers on behalf of the Indian Archaeological Society, 1973), 23.

> obscene, to say the least. We have seen such sexism in films, advertising – but now children's comics![98]

However, the majority of the comic book readers that I spoke with responded positively to the depiction of women, and many of them commented on the "accuracy" of their clothing in particular. When asked what he thought of the representation of women in *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, one twenty-four-year-old male reader immediately turned to the issue of the accuracy of women's clothing, stating:

> On a relative scale, I've seen women dressed up like eye-candy more often right now than I did back when I was a kid, but that wasn't the kind of fantasy I was interested in escaping to back then! Seriously enough, they were drawn well, often better than their male counterparts, and dressed pretty accurately to the period they were in. As far as virtue went, they were either straight or crooked, and the complex moral-ambiguity type personas were most often seen in the males.[99]

In response to the same question, another reader, a twenty-seven-year-old male who currently resides in the U.S. and identified himself as "a very proud Hindu," stated:

> This aspect of representing women in India should be glorified as much as possible. The Indian lady was so open in her dress code back in the good olden days. It was only after the unfortunate series of invasions that women started to cover themselves more and more. Through *Amar Chitra Katha* I began to feel a sense of pride about Indian women and this is just one of the "values" I cherish among all the others that *Amar Chitra Katha* has given me. And today the West talks about women being discriminated in India. If only they take a look at our culture and if only they look at themselves and the kind of lives they lead. *Amar Chitra Katha* has built in me a pride about my race, my culture, my history and my India.[100]

Most of the college-age women that I interviewed also responded positively to the depiction of women in these comic books, stating that they found them very pretty and appealing. One postgraduate student in India stated, "I remember thinking that their

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[98] Sanjay Joshi, "ACKs: Distorted History or Education?" *The Telegraph* (Sunday, November 13, 1983), 8. Brackets mine.

[99] Anonymous fan 3.1, written correspondence with the author, October 16, 2002.

[100] Anonymous fan 3.2, written correspondence with the author, October 22, 2002.

dress, their ornaments are just so amazing. Sometimes I would even try to paint the women after reading the comics."[101] Several other female students present nodded their heads in agreement. But one of her colleagues disagreed, saying as she flipped through the *Shakuntala* comic:

> Actually, they are only perpetuating stereotypes in the *Amar Chitra Katha*. In all these pictures the characters are romanticized. They have those curvaceous women revealing everything in fanciful dresses and exotic jewelry and all that. I mean, look how they show the women as being so coy, yet showing everything, even their navels![102]

Apart from the occasional criticism, however, the depiction of women and their clothing in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books has been overwhelmingly perceived as both positive and "accurate." This general acceptance of a single, revealing costume for all Indian women from the Vedic through the medieval period – not to mention a single, voluptuous feminine figure – as "authentic" and "accurate" demonstrates how dominant the late nineteenth-century image of the ideal Indian woman as simultaneously a goddess and a sex object has become. In fact, the perceived "authenticity" of these comic books is so great that they are now even used as reference material by the producers of television serials set in premodern India. Zarina Mehta, a producer at United Television (UTV) in Mumbai, commented that these comics are used as reference material not only by the costume designers for their depiction of Indian costumes and ornaments, but also by the set designers for their depiction of landscapes, buildings, and courts.[103] Ms. Mehta produced a television serial based on the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books that aired on Doordarshan (DD1) in the late 1990s. Although she had originally conceived of an animated series, the production time and expense proved too prohibitive. For these reasons she decided to make it a live-action series, but still used the comic books as the

[101] Anonymous fan 3.3, group interview conducted by the author in Mumbai, March 27, 2002.
[102] Anonymous fan 3.4, group interview conducted by the author in Mumbai, March 27, 2002.
[103] Zarina Mehta, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 11, 2002.

visual guide for the costumes, sets, and narrative flow. In making their "Shakuntala" episodes, therefore, the actress was costumed and coiffed just like the comic heroine. In fact, Mehta stated that the only major deviation from the comic book was in the opening that they used:

> In the television medium, the first two minutes of a show are very important – that is when you must hook the audience. The *ACK*s can be very slow in the beginning. We would never start with a "once upon a time" slow sort of opening. We started with a big event, with action, to lure the children in. The rest of the story and the endings we often told in the same way as they were told in the comics, but it was important to change the beginning.[104]

Mehta felt that the first few pages of the *Shakuntala* comic book, in particular, were far too slow. Beginning with Shakuntala's birth and adoption, the story does not begin to depict the interaction between Shakuntala and Dushyant until the fourth page. But in order to hook the audience right away, the television serial had to begin with Dushyant's first glimpse of Shakuntala in the forest.[105] Here in the first scene of the televised "Shakuntala" series – as on the cover of the *Shakuntala* comic book – the "male gaze" that we have become accustomed to viewing Shakuntala through dominates.

In the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books, it is not just Shakuntala who is depicted in this frozen dramatic moment that allows the gaze to linger on her form, so that we readers can take in the external markers of her femininity, including her posture, jewelry, costume, and hairstyle, while also reflecting upon the more internal markers of her femininity, including her modesty, spirituality, and self-sacrificing nature. In the comic books, this one visual style is employed to depict a range of women from throughout the vast corpus of Indian myth, history, and legend – classical literary heroines such as Malavika and Shakuntala, historical queens like Padmini, and Hindu goddesses such as Sati – for all of these women demonstrate how an ordinary woman can be transformed

[104] Zarina Mehta, ibid.
[105] Zarina Mehta, ibid.

into a goddess through unswerving adherence to the code of *stridharma* (woman's duty), the normative code of behavior for Hindu women, according to which the wife is to worship her husband as her lord. According to Julia Leslie, this feminine ideal of the orthodox Hindu tradition is expounded in a range of religious texts, both old and new; assumed in most of the ancient myths and traditional stories; and is widely held by both women and men throughout India today.[106] Such a woman is known as a *pativratā* (one who vows to worship her husband as her lord), and is characterized by her modest, self-sacrificing, long-suffering nature. Shakuntala, who patiently and without complaint endured one hardship after another while waiting for her husband to come to his senses, is one pativratā; another is the goddess Sati, who was so devoted to her husband, Shiva, that when her father insulted him by refusing to invite him to a sacrifice, she killed herself in protest **[Fig. 3.11]**; a third is the historical queen Padmini, who committed *sati* (self-immolation) in order to free her husband to fight and die on the battlefield and to escape the advances of the invading king **[Fig. 3.12]**.

Discussing the *tapasvinī*, the self-denying woman who achieves power through the performance of ritualized acts of self-mortification *(tapas)*, Kathryn Hansen argues that the tapasvinī exemplifies a heroics of masochism, and that the woman who commits sati is glorified because her action is the most public and final way in which a faithful wife can demonstrate her heroic endurance: "The sati is deified because her acts – like those of Parvati, Sita, Savitri and other goddesses – represent the normative achievement

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[106] Julia Leslie, "Recycling Ancient Material: An Orthodox View of Hindu Women," in L. Archer, S. Fischler, and M. Wyke, eds., *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night* (Hampshire: MacMillan, 1994), 233-251. Ann Gold argues that goddesses are female powers that are not separate from the human world, and are sometimes incorporated into mortal female identities. She writes that in her field research in Rajasthan she has noted pervasive continuities between women and goddesses that are traceable in everyday life: women's devotional songs typically describe female deities who like the same things they do (jewelry, clothes, fine food), and who experience the same emotions. See Ann Grodzins Gold, "Gender, Violence and Power: Rajasthani Stories of Shakti," in Nita Kumar, ed., *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 26-48.

of self-sacrifice carried to an heroic extreme."[107] The woman who commits sati, therefore, belongs on the same ideological continuum with other pativratās, a continuum that incorporates history and myth, mortality and immortality, the secular and the sacred.

In the *Padmini* comic book, Padmini is upheld as "a perfect model of ideal Indian womanhood" for her willingness to sacrifice herself by committing sati.[108] The depiction of sati in this and other *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book issues has generated substantial criticism and debate. In 1977, just a few years after the publication of *Padmini*, the Indian Federation of University Women's Associations (IFUWA) surveyed over sixty *Amar Chitra Katha* titles in order to determine whether there was a sexist bias to the comic books, and concluded that there was, citing among other things the emphasis on the "pre-eminent presence and role of men, on women as appendages, on the emphasis on the 'home syndrome' and value of 'self-sacrifice,' obedient wives, a high premium on fertility…" in the series.[109] Speaking of the *Padmini* issue specifically, Journalist and activist Bulbul Pal accused the producers of these comic books of glorifying sati,[110] and several female readers that I interviewed came to the same conclusion. One reader, a college student in Mumbai, said to me:

> I have been looking through this *Padmini* comic book. This comic, especially the ending, really does glorify sati. This is quite evident from the ending. This is where the mediation comes into the telling of history. Of course it is a fact that this practice existed, but that is not enough to justify its presence here in this format. And here it is glorified as a personal choice, a heroic choice. Look at this

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[107] Kathryn Hansen, "Heroic Modes of Women in Indian Myth, Ritual and History: The *Tapasvinī* and the *Vīrāṅganā*," in A. Sharma and K. Young, eds., *The Annual Review of Women in World Religions*, vol. II (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 17-18.

[108] *Padmini*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 44 (Bombay: India Book House, 1973), inside front cover.

[109] Cited by John A. Lent, "India's *Amar Chitra Katha*: 'Fictionalized' History or the Real Story?" *International Journal of Comic Art* (Spring 2004), 67. Also see Kamalini Kumar, "Confused Ideals in Fantasy Land," *The Telegraph* (May 8, 1983), 7.

[110] Bulbul Pal, "Angry Young Men and Weepy Women," *Express Magazine* (Sunday, Nov. 22, 1987).

> cover picture. It is told as if she wished herself to do this. But its social context, that is not told. Did Padmini really have a choice?[111]

Anant Pai is familiar with this criticism, and had an explanation for the idealized depiction of Padmini ready for me when I raised the subject with him:

> I am always asked, wherever I go, about sati, about why I depicted Padmini burning herself. But it happened. I cannot change that. And the Rajputs saw it as an act of bravery. You know, this is the explanation I always give: "That which is done for the good of others, even at the cost of the self, is good; that which is done to benefit the self, at the cost of another, is a sin." … This is how I decide what should be depicted and what shouldn't be.[112]

On another occasion he justified the depiction of sati by arguing that different times have different values, and that we must not use modern yardsticks to measure the stalwarts of Indian mythology and history.[113] This is similar to the argument made by Yagya Sharma, the author of the *Padmini* comic book, during my interview with him: "You see, our cultural values today look down upon sati. But cultural values change over time. We have stopped looking at cultural values historically. Sati was considered for ages to be the epitome of a woman's value."[114] When I asked him whether sati was common in only certain regions, like Rajasthan, or during a certain time or among a specific group of people, he continued:

> Sati was a value throughout India, not just in Rajasthan. Amongst the Hindu masses only, of course. Not the Muslims. But I am not saying that sati should be a value today. You know, a lot of ugly things happened in history. Women of that period were willing to give the ultimate sacrifice for their honor – and this is what the value is, not sati itself.[115]

Former associate editor Kamala Chandrakant was also familiar with the criticism of the depiction of sati in these comics, and stated that one of her personal goals in

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[111] Anonymous fan 3.5, group interview conducted by the author in Mumbai, March 27, 2002.
[112] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, February 18, 2002.
[113] Anant Pai, letter to the editor written in response to Bulbul Pal's article, published in *Express Magazine* (Sunday, Nov. 29, 1987).
[114] Yagya Sharma, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 16, 2002.
[115] Yagya Sharma, ibid.

joining the company and writing comic book scripts was to depict strong female characters and to portray gender equity. She recalled several debates that took place in the comic book studio over the depiction of women. Some of these, she said, occurred over surprisingly minor issues, not just over issues like sati. When I asked her for an example, she recalled the creation of the *Shiva Parvati* issue (no. 29, 1972) just after she joined the company in 1971, during which she required numerous pencil sketches in order to get the characterization of Parvati just right:

> In this story Parvati does penance in order to get Shiva as a husband. There is one panel – you look at it and see – in which I made the panel in order to show equality between the two, between Shiva and Parvati. It is not just Parvati wanting Shiva; they want one another equally – she wants him and he wants her too.[116]

The *Shiva Parvati* issue does feature a panel, perhaps the same one that Ms. Chandrakant had in mind, in which Shiva and Parvati look longingly at one another, while Shiva declares himself to be her willing slave **[Fig. 3.13]**. But this issue is also one that tells the story of a woman/goddess, Parvati, who performs prolonged acts of penance in order to win a man's/god's attention and love. She is the pativratā par excellence, the wife whose perfect devotion to her lord worshippers strive to imitate through heroic endeavors of their own in order to gain Shiva's blessing.[117] I asked Kamala whether she considered Parvati to be an ideal woman, or a role model for girls today. She replied:

> Our women then – epic women – had greater liberties than anything that the West can bring to us now. It was only after the outside invaders came that this changed, that their status was lowered so that they were not equal. Take the British legal and economic system. Our old economic system, the one devised by Chanakya, that regarded men and women as equal. But the British and other invaders, they did not think this way.[118]

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[116] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.
[117] Kathryn Hansen, "Heroic Modes of Women," op. cit., 8-9.
[118] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.

It is significant that Ms. Chandrakant has chosen to locate this feminine ideal in the epic period, a past "golden age" of Hindu civilization. Prompted for more information on whether the epic age was a golden age for Indian women, Chandrakant continued:

> Women had it better in the Vedic age and the epic age than they do now. When the marauders came from Mongolia, that is when women's decline happened. That is when purdah was introduced. Then women had to be protected, curtained from those men. Previously women were free to choose their own partners, and could even leave them. Like Satyavati in the *Mahabharat*. She wanted Bheeshma to impregnate her daughters, and cites examples of women leaving their men for other men. It was then that Bheeshma laid down the law that a woman can have only one husband. Before that polyandry was common – as common as polygamy was for men. This is the case with Draupadi – she knows the legal system, knows about polyandry and polygamy.[119]

This location of the feminine ideal within a past "golden age" of Hindu civilization is built upon the idea as it was advanced in the nineteenth century in both Orientalist and nationalist discourses. Like the heroines in Ravi Varma's paintings, who embodied the female virtues of modesty, chastity, self-sacrifice, devotion, and patience and exercised the modern freedoms that were common to all women in the highly cultured Aryan past, the heroines in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books embody the same virtues and exercise the same freedoms. In Mr. Pai's words:

> It is certainly not correct to say that the image of women has been negative in *Amar Chitra Katha.* … A society that allows a woman to declare her attraction and propose to the man exhibits quite some freedom of thought, doesn't it? Women's right to marry the man of their choice has been portrayed in a number of works. Shakuntala exercises this right and marries Dushyanta by exchanging garlands.[120]

As in the nineteenth century, so too in *Amar Chitra Katha* comics is the classical heroine Shakuntala upheld as one of the foremost role models for contemporary women and girls.

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[119] Kamala Chandrakant, ibid.

[120] Anant Pai, letter to the editor, op. cit.

AN ALTERNATIVE FEMININE IDEAL IN *AMAR CHITRA KATHA*

In the mid-1970s, after several female authors had joined the growing *Amar Chitra Katha* staff – including Kamala Chandrakant, Toni Patel, Meena Ranade, and Mala Singh, among others – debates about the depiction of women in the comic book series increased, resulting in the release of several new comic books featuring female protagonists, but of a different nature. These heroines were martial, independent, active, decisive women who fought for their land and people. Unlike the pativratā, who is always depicted in static poses, these martial women are depicted in more active postures: commanding troops, wielding weapons in the midst of battles, and riding horses, as on the cover of the *Rani of Jhansi* issue (no. 51, 1974) **[Fig. 3.14]**. These women do not wear the scanty costumes of the pativratā women, but instead adopt male attire. Kathryn Hansen has contrasted this second type of feminine ideal with the tapasvinī, and labeled this alternative paradigm of Indian womanhood the *vīrāṅganā*, the woman who manifests the qualities of heroism *(vīryam)*. She describes the vīrāṅganā in the following way:

> She is a valiant fighter who distinguishes herself by prowess in warfare, an activity normally reserved for men. She demonstrates her martial skills and courage by direct participation in combat, at the risk of her life; in fact, sometimes she dies in battle or takes her own life on the battlefield to avoid ignominious defeat. She is a leader of women and men, acting as head of state during peace and general in time of war. She adopts male attire, as well as the symbols of male status and authority, especially the sword, and she rides a horse. The vīrāṅganā is dedicated to virtue, wisdom, and the defence of her people. Above all, she is a fighter and a victor in the struggle with the forces of evil.[121]

The first *Amar Chitra Katha* issues to depict this alternative feminine ideal were *Tarabai* (no. 48, 1974), *Rani of Jhansi* (no. 51, 1974), *Chand Bibi* (no. 54, 1974), *Ahilyabai Holkar* (no. 74, 1974), *Rani Durgavati* (no. 104, 1976), and *Sultana Razia* (no.

[121] Kathryn Hansen, "Heroic Modes of Women," op. cit., 22.

110, 1976). All of these heroines were historical queens who fought for their land and people as independent agents. Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, for instance, ruled Jhansi after her husband's death and participated in the Indian Mutiny of 1857 after the British decided to annex her state because her husband had died without a male heir (the son they had adopted was not recognized by the British). As on the cover, several panels inside the *Rani of Jhansi* comic book depict the queen dressed in men's clothing and leading her troops on horseback into battle against the British **[Fig. 3.15]**. An extra panel has been inserted in the middle of this page to highlight the action of this scene: it contains no text, and is a close-up shot of the horses' feet as they run across the battlefield, with British troops in red coats falling in the background. Care has been taken, however, to moderate the queen's martial qualities. The introduction to the comic book, for instance, stresses Lakshmibai's "bravery and dauntless courage" while also noting that she was "not aggressive by nature and it was only when the British threatened to annex her small kingdom that she took up arms."[122] It is also made clear early in the comic book, on pages 5 and 6, that the queen did not seek the throne for herself, but ruled only on behalf of the king's adopted son, still in his infancy, and for the good of the people. This same emphasis is found in most popular depictions of Lakshmibai, which show her charging on horseback with her adopted son strapped to her back. In fact, nearly all of the martial women featured in these comic books came into power as regents, ruling the kingdom upon their husbands' or fathers' deaths and on behalf of a juvenile male heir. Another martial queen featured in the comics is Ahilyabai Holkar, who ruled an area of modern Maharashtra from the time of her husband's death in 1765 until her own death in 1795. Kathryn Hansen has remarked upon how the *Ahilyabai Holkar* comic book issue shows Ahilyabai wavering between her desire to become a sati and her eventual decision to

[122] *Rani of Jhansi*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 51 (Bombay: India Book House, 1974), inside front cover.

dedicate her life to serving others by acting as regent on behalf of her mentally unstable son.[123]

Razia Sultana is one exception to this pattern, for she succeeded to the throne on her own accord. Razia was the daughter of Iltutmish, the Sultan of Delhi (r. 1229-36), and was chosen over her brothers to follow in her father's footsteps after his death. In the *Sultana Razia* comic (no. 110, 1976), Razia does attain the throne, but the forty amirs object to having a woman as ruler, so Razia abdicates, saying: "My good friends, please stop quarreling. I understand your prejudice against my sex. Therefore let us all swear allegiance to my brother, Ruknuddin."[124] But as Ruknuddin is more devoted to pleasures than to ruling the kingdom, the people rally around Razia and she is again declared to be the Sultana. She promises her subjects: "My people! I promise before God that I shall prove worthy of your trust. And because I am born a woman, I here and now solemnly pledge that I shall sit on this great throne of our ancestors only if I prove to be as good as any man."[125] The comic book then lists the means by which Razia proved to be as good as a man. Significant inclusions in this list are that she "dressed and acted like a king," "she was the leader of her armies," and that she "appeared frequently in public without a veil."[126] To this last item an objection is raised that Razia had always veiled in her father's time. Razia responds: "But in my father's time I was not the ruler. Now I face my subjects as their Sultana." "True, your majesty, but you are a woman…" is the reply. Razia answers, "To the people, I am their protector and benefactor."[127] Razia proves to be a competent and just ruler, but the focus of the second half of the comic book is on the conflict between Razia the woman and Razia the Sultana. Razia is unable to marry her

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[123] Kathryn Hansen, "Heroic Modes of Women," op. cit., 31 and footnote 69.
[124] *Sultana Razia*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 110 (Bombay: India Book House, 1976), 5.
[125] *Sultana Razia*, ibid., 13.
[126] *Sultana Razia*, ibid., 13-15.
[127] *Sultana Razia*, ibid., 15.

true love, the Amir Altunia, for fear that the other amirs will become jealous and the stability of the government will dissipate. Altunia grows jealous of Razia's relationship with another amir and wages battle with her, defeating her forces and capturing her. Upon her defeat Razia's half-brother, Behram, is proclaimed Sultan. Razia, however, is concerned only with her relationship with Altunia. She alleviates his jealousy and then, after agreeing to begin a new life together with him, the two are married. The comic book ends on a tragicly romantic note, when, following their wedding, Altunia and Razia decide to together reclaim the Delhi throne, but are defeated and killed by Behram's forces.

Discussing the popular Bollywood film "Razia Sultan" (directed by Kamal Amrohi) that was released in 1983, just a few years after the *Sultana Razia* comic book, Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy note how in this medium as well Razia's life story has been transformed into a tragic love story:

> While the historical Razia has yet to find her place, the mythical Razia, her polar opposite in every sense, has found an audience of many lakhs of people. The real Razia fought tooth and nail to keep herself in power, the mythical Razia proclaims in a Laila-like fashion that the 'emperor's garb' is a 'shroud' which she would relinquish without the slightest hesitation, because it was an impediment to the fulfillment of her love. Not a single historian protested against the gross distortion of history, and the government of India, which is apparently committed to raising the status of women, considered its duty towards women complete when it gave the film a tax exemption.[128]

Although the comic book producers incorporated this alternative feminine ideal after much debate in an effort to celebrate these historical queens' martial deeds and independence, and to provide an alternative to the pativratā, the vīrāṅganā ideal nonetheless demonstrates the limited range of that debate. In several important ways, the

[128] Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy, "In Search of Our Past: A Review of the Limitations and Possibilities of the Historiography of Women in Early India," *Economic and Political Weekly* (April 30 1988), WS7.

vīrāṅganā ideal overlaps with the pativratā (or tapasvinī) ideal: the emphases on regency, motherhood, romantic love, and, above all, through the heroines' ultimate sacrifice. All of these heroines ultimately sacrifice their lives on the battlefield, dying while fighting on behalf of their people. The *Rani Durgavati* issue (no. 104, 1976), for example, concludes with a final battle between Durgavati, the regent of Gondwana, and Asaf Khan, the leader of Akbar's imperial army. Rani Durgavati's badly outnumbered forces lose heart and flee after her son is killed on the battlefield, but she fights on, despite the impossible odds and her own wounds. Finally, her charioteer advises the badly wounded queen to cease fighting and seek safe harbor. Durgavati rejects his suggestion and instead takes her own life **[Fig. 3.16]**. Significantly, on this page Durgavati expresses sentiments that are quite similar to Padmini's before she committed sati in order to save herself from being physically defiled at the hands of the invading enemy. Refusing to take the risk of falling into enemy hands, Durgavati stabs herself, saying: "I would rather die in honour than live in disgrace."[129]

This overlap between the two feminine ideals, the pativratā and the vīrāṅganā, is a modern phenomenon. Cynthia Talbot has discussed in some detail one medieval martial queen, Rudrama-devi (r. 1262-1289 C.E.), the fourth independent ruler in the Kakatiya dynasty in Andhra, who was chosen by her father as his successor.[130] Like the other historical martial queens depicted in the comic books, Rudrama too adopted a male name, Rudra-deva, possessed the male title of king, wore masculine clothing, and acted like a warrior to the extent of dying in battle. Talbot argues that this is because Hindu gender ideology of the time mandated that rulers be males. However, it was also flexible enough

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[129] *Rani Durgavati, Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 104 (Bombay: India Book House, 1976), 31.

[130] Cynthia Talbot, "Rudrama-devi, the Female King: Gender and Political Authority in Medieval India," in D. Shulman, ed., *Syllables of Sky: Stories in South Indian Civilization in Honour of Velcheru Narayana Rao* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 391-430.

to accommodate women like Rudrama-devi whose overt behavior was sufficiently masculine. While Rudrama was understood to be a male socially, she was also understood to be a female biologically. One inscription, for instance, alternates back and forth between the feminine and masculine versions of her name, praising feminine virtues (her generosity and beauty) and then masculine virtues (her ruling and fighting skills). In the privileging of maternal and wifely obligations and romantic scenarios, these comics seem to demonstrate a marked and more recent discomfort with the medieval Indian gender ideology that recognized a difference between sex as a biological given and gender as an enacted social role.

Like the first feminine ideal, the pativratā, the construction of this alternative feminine ideal, the vīrāṅganā, also has its origins in the nineteenth-century debate about the place of women in Indian society. While many nationalists turned towards Vedic and epic heroines as spiritual and cultural models for the new Indian woman, others turned towards historical female warriors as examples of women who, guided by the Kshatriya values of courage and bravery, were able to resist the might of alien rule. However, such resistance was almost always characterized in a "helpmate" way, so that women's actions were shown to be valuable precisely because they enabled men to resist to the very end.[131] In nationalist stories and images of female warriors, the martial woman quickly became an emblem of the nation itself, Mother India personified, and emotional appeals were made to men to liberate her from her foreign oppressors. Bal Gangadhar Tilak and other nationalists of the Extremist party, for instance, upheld the Rani of Jhansi as an example of Mother India engaged in righteous struggle against the British.[132] As with the

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[131] Bankimchandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandamath* (1882) is one early example of writing featuring a martial woman, Shanti, who dresses as a male *sanyasi* in order to fight by the side of her husband on the battlefield and thereby enable him to take part in the effort to liberate the Motherland.

[132] Joyce Lebra-Chapman, *The Rani of Jhansi: A Study of Female Heroism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 143-146.

pativratā, then, here too there is slippage between the secular and the sacred, as historical women are likened with martial goddesses such as Durga and Kali and with the nation of India personified as a goddess. Aware of this slippage and the political ramifications of such potent allegories during the colonial period, the British banned literature and images of these martial heroines, historical and mythological alike.[133] Nonetheless, such allegorical associations continued to be made throughout the colonial period and beyond in the various print and other media. The late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, for instance, was often likened to the goddess Durga during her term. Uma Chakravarti argues that the normative model of womanhood from the latter part of the nineteenth century forward was the pativratā, but the martial woman was also incorporated into the equation as a response to the colonial criticism of the status of women in contemporary India:

> Reaction to the attacks by colonial writers ensured that Indian women were almost built up as superwomen: a combination of the spiritual Maitreyi, the learned Gargi, the suffering Sita, the faithful Savitri and the heroic Lakshmibai. … In this model of womanhood there was no difference between the perceptions of progressives and of conservatives.[134]

Such superwomen – pativratā and vīrāṅganā, mythological and historical – are the heroines featured in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series.

Discussing the portrayal of women in this comic book series, Frances Pritchett writes:

> There are as yet no women on the "Makers of Modern India" list – no Sarojini Naidu (surely the obvious first choice), no Kasturba Gandhi, no Kamala Nehru, no Durgabai Deshmukh, no Anasuyabehn Sarabhai, no Vijayalakshmi Pandit. (And, it should be noted, no Indira Gandhi.) Moreover, even outside the "Makers

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[133] For instance, Joyce Lebra-Chapman discusses many literary works about the Rani of Jhansi that were banned in *The Rani of Jhansi*, op. cit.; and Christopher Pinney discusses the banning of lithographic images of the goddess Kali that were interpreted by the British as seditious political allegories in his article "Indian Magical Realism," op. cit.

[134] Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*?," op. cit., 79. But I am more persuaded by the argument that the more conservative nationalists typically favored the pativratā, while the more radical nationalists typically favored the vīrāṅganā ideal. See Hansen, "Heroic Modes of Women," op. cit., 39.

> of Modern India" category, there are no educated, urban, twentieth-century women in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series at all.[135]

Although the comic book series includes male protagonists from the modern period, there are indeed no Indian female protagonists from the modern period. Instead, female protagonists remain limited to premodern historical heroines and classical epic heroines and goddesses. When I asked Yagya Sharma, the author of the *Padmini* comic book and other issues, whether Padmini was a role model for girls today, his reply was negative: "No. The Padmini issue is not teaching girls today to perform sati. But at the time I wrote it, I didn't think about this stuff, you know? With hindsight I do."[136] He continued, "Scholarly ladies would be better role models for today's girls. But the lives of scholarly ladies, they are devoid of the dramatic events that comics need. So it is hard to depict good role models for girls." But perhaps the absence of modern heroines in this comic book series has less to do with a lack of dramatic action in modern Indian women's lives, and more to do with the many ways in which ideal Indian womanhood has been located within the past "golden age" from the colonial period forward. For both visually and ideologically, the depiction of women in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series remains indebted to its nineteenth-century roots, roots that made appeals to "traditional" stories and figures, but were actually "modern" attempts to formulate visual and gender identities within the context of colonial modernity.

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[135] Frances W. Pritchett, "The World of *Amar Chitra Katha*," in L. Babb and S. Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 95.
[136] Yagya Sharma, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 16, 2002.

Chapter 4: 'Har Har Mahadev': History, Mythology, and the Memory of Shivaji in *Amar Chitra Katha*

After nearly a dozen successful mythological comic book issues, including *Krishna* (no. 11, 1969), *Shakuntala* (no. 12, 1970), *Rama* (no. 15, 1971), *Hanuman* (no. 19, 1971), and *Mahabharata* (no. 20, 1971), Anant Pai, founder and editor of *Amar Chitra Katha*, felt that it was time to branch out. It was in an effort to promote national integration, he has stated, that he decided to introduce historical subjects into the comic book series, featuring stories of kings and queens from throughout India in order to teach "people in one region of the country [about] the culture, history and ways of life of people in another [region]."[1] The first historical figure chosen was the seventeenth-century Maratha king Shivaji Bhonsle (1627-80), who was featured in the *Shivaji* issue (no. 23) in 1971 **[Fig. 4.1]**. Shivaji is famous throughout India, but especially in Western India among Marathi-speaking Hindus, for battling the Mughal Empire and ultimately founding an independent Maratha kingdom in 1674.

When I asked Anant Pai why Shivaji was the one chosen, out of all other possible historical Indian figures, for this first historical comic book, he explained: "Shivaji was a great liberal. He had many people in his court, and at his side in battle. Many religions, many castes. He is a hero for that reason. He fought for all of India, for India's independence. He fought against Aurangzeb to make his own kingdom."[2] As this quote suggests, the *Shivaji* comic book presents Shivaji not merely as a regional historical figure, but as a national Indian hero. Yet although Anant Pai describes Shivaji as someone that members of all castes and religions can look up to, Shivaji's history has been contested throughout the modern period, and remains so today. In this chapter, I

[1] V. Gangadhar, "Anant Pai and His *Amar Chitra Kathas*," *Reader's Digest [of India]* (August 1988), 140.
[2] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 6, 2002.

examine how a local historical figure has been transformed into an icon of national pride. In addition to the variety of textual narratives of Shivaji that have been produced since the nineteenth century, I also investigate visual sources – which remain largely neglected – in order to understand the growing prominence of this figure as a national Indian hero. I ask which textual and visual narratives of Shivaji the producers have drawn upon, and which they have excluded, to construct their comic book. I also ask to what extent Anant Pai's own identity as a Brahman Hindu residing in Maharashtra (though not originally from Maharashtra) has affected this selection, and how larger issues of caste, region, and religion play out in this comic book narrative. Finally, I ask how the narrative of this first "historical" comic book has been impacted by the template established for the earlier "mythological" comic book issues.

SHIVAJI: 'A GREAT LIBERAL'?

On the cover of the *Shivaji* comic book, Shivaji is depicted astride his horse, leading his Maratha soldiers through the hills of Maharashtra. They have presumably just left the fort that sits atop the hill in the background, and are now on their way to engage in another battle, for the soldiers hold their weapons raised up in the air, and Shivaji wields his sword above his head, as if all were united in chanting their famous war cry, "Har Har Mahadev!" A sense of urgency is conveyed by the angle of the horse's legs and the flow of its tail in the wind, and the combination of dark red, saffron, and purple colors further heighten the sense of melodrama, suggesting that Shivaji and his troops are in the midst of a whirlwind campaign, leaving one fort at sunset and traveling on to the next throughout the night, without time to rest or even celebrate their victories. The artist who created this cover image, Pratap Mulick, stated that "all of the criss-crossing lines in the *Shivaji* cover are meant to create a sense of action," because he believed that "Shivaji

on horseback, in that pose, should be a very active figure."[3] These active, narrative elements of the comic book cover work to remind the viewer of the whole of Shivaji's heroic story. But as the viewer looks toward Shivaji in the center of the image, a deliberate suspension of the narrative action occurs, achieved through what Svetlana Alpers has called a "fixity of pose and an avoidance of outward expression."[4] Shivaji's face does not betray any emotion that would forward the narrative action or help the comic book fan to "read" the image. Indeed, despite the narrative elements that frame Shivaji, no specific event is actually "told" – Shivaji could be leaving any of the forts that he is associated with, and could be traveling on to any battle. In this way, the comic book cover does not present a "pictorial narrative," but an abstraction of Shivaji's narrative: Shivaji is here presented as an icon, an immortal hero – he is the martial Maratha warrior who is forever ready to ride off into the sunset to battle his enemies.[5] In this cover image, then, the pictorial modes of narrative and icon are combined, neither mode completely separate from the other, establishing a dynamic between realism and idealism, between Shivaji's past actions and his timeless heroism, between history and mythology.

In the West, scholars have generally spoken in oppositional terms about narrative and iconic representation. Drawing upon studies of narratology in the field of literary criticism, which differentiated between "narration" as a discussion of events that moves the plot forward and "description" as a static representation of people, things, and situations that halts the plot flow, scholars arrived at a definition of pictorial narrative that similarly set up a binary opposition between narrative (or active) and iconic (or static)

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[3] Pratap Mulick, interviewed by the author in Pune, January 21, 2002.

[4] See Svetlana Alpers' discussion of the difference between "description" and "narration" in seventeenth-century realist painting, "Describe or Narrate?: A Problem in Realistic Representation," *New Literary History*, vol. 8 (1976), esp. p. 15.

[5] Here I draw upon Irene Winter's discussion of pictorial narrative in her article "After the Battle is Over: The *Stele of the Vultures* and the Beginning of Historical Narrative in the Art of the Ancient Near East," *Studies in the History of Art*, vol. 16 (1985), 11-31.

representation.[6] What is more, a further binary came into play between history and mythology when narrative images were equated with historical events, and iconic images with mythological personas. This latter binary has been particularly prevalent in the academic study of Indian art. For example, the colonial quest to identify the historical Buddha has resulted in the lasting dominance of narrative issues in the study of early Buddhist art.[7] Fortunately, several scholars have begun the work of deconstructing these binaries. Scholars of Indian art, in particular, are now attempting to dislodge the strict division between narrative and iconic representation, arguing that such a division is not necessarily applicable in the Indian context. For instance, Janice Leoshko has demonstrated that Pala-period images of the Buddha are often both narrative and iconic; and in her discussion of Orissan illustrations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic, Joanna Williams writes that although we may be tempted to distinguish the narrative picture from the iconic (in India) or from the descriptive (in the West), there are many mixed examples of both, particularly when only one moment is depicted.[8] The power of the *Shivaji* comic book cover image – and of the comic book as a whole – lies in that mixture of narrative and icon, history and mythology. Like the introduction to the *Ganga* issue (no. 88, 1975), which claims that "Mythology is not all fact, we know, but yet, in its vast poetic

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[6] For instance, G. Lukacs, "Narrate or Describe," in A. Kahn, ed., *Writer and Critic and Other Essays* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1970); Richard Brilliant, *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), esp. p. 17. But for an excellent deconstructive discussion, see Irene Winter, "After the Battle is Over," op. cit.

[7] See Janice Leoshko, *Sacred Traces: British Explorations of Buddhism in South Asia* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003). Leoshko notes that an example of the dominance of narrative issues in the study of Buddhist art in India is the recently renewed debate over a possible aniconic phase. See Leoshko, page 15; for this debate, see Susan Huntington, "Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism," *Art Journal* 49 (Winter 1990), 401-408; Vidya Dehejia, "Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems," *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1992), 45-66; Susan Huntington, "Aniconism and the Multivalence of Images," *Ars Orientalis* 22 (1992), 111-156.

[8] Janice Leoshko, "About Looking at Buddha Images in East India," *Archives of Asian Art* 52 (2001), 74-75; Joanna Williams, *The Two-Headed Deer: Illustrations of the Ramayana in Orissa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 110; see also Vidya Dehejia's discussion of monoscenic narratives, "On Modes of Visual Narration in Early Buddhist Art," *The Art Bulletin* 72 (1990), 374-392.

exaggerations, one can always trace an outline of truth,"[9] the cover of the *Shivaji* comic book proclaims the complementarity of the narrative and the iconic modes, and of historical and mythological "truths."

The *Shivaji* comic book begins with Shivaji's birth, and then proceeds to describe his schooling in such subjects as reading and writing, archery and horsemanship. His mother, Jijabai, tells him stories from the great Indian epics, including the *Bhagavad Gītā*, teaching young Shivaji about Lord Krishna's lesson that "even death in the cause of one's duty should be dear to a hero's heart." In response, Shivaji wonders aloud what his duty is, whether it is "to fight for a foreign king by the side of my father? Or to fight for my people, against the king?" His mother responds, "Your duty lies in fighting for your people."[10] Shivaji takes his mother's lesson to heart, and begins to gather a band of boys around him who agree to fight for their freedom. After they capture their first fort, Shivaji receives blessings and congratulations from his mother, but his father, Shahji, is arrested by Sultan Ali Adil Shah II (r. 1656-72) of Bijapur. The Sultan sends troops to battle Shivaji, but Shivaji and his friends are quickly able to defeat them. It is at this point in 1659 that the Sultan sends his general, Afzal Khan, together with a large army, to face Shivaji.

After one of Shivaji's spies warns him of Afzal Khan's plans to assassinate him during their meeting, Shivaji begins to prepare carefully: he prays to Goddess Bhavani **[Fig. 4.2]**, he puts on armor under his clothing, and he affixes his easily-hidden tigerclaw weapon to his right hand. Then he bravely walks down the hill from the Pratapgarh fort

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[9] *Ganga*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 88 (Bombay: India Book House, 1975), inside front cover.

[10] *Shivaji*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 23 (Bombay: India Book House, 1971), 3-4. In this comic book, Shivaji's mother, Jijabai, demonstrates the way in which the figure of the mother is upheld in nationalist discourse as not only the biological reproducer of the members of the nation, but also as the active transmitter of national culture in that she educates her children in the ways of the nation. See Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, *Women-Nation-State* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

to the appointed meeting spot, accompanied by only two guards. The next panel highlights Afzal Khan's treachery. As Afzal Khan stands awaiting Shivaji with open arms and a smile, he says, "Come, my son," while thinking to himself, "Your end is near!" In greeting, Shivaji embraces Afzal Khan, who holds a raised dagger in his right hand. But Shivaji is alert, waiting only for some indication of Afzal Khan's intent. In the next full-page panel, Afzal Khan cries out "Ya Allah!" as Shivaji manages to wrench the dagger from his hand and stab him with it, piercing his stomach **[Fig. 4.3]**.

The encounter between Shivaji and Afzal Khan is presented not only as an epic struggle between two men, one a hero and the other a villain, but also as a communal one. When Afzal Khan first sets out with his army against Shivaji, he is shown commanding his troops to pull down Shivaji's favorite temple to Goddess Bhavani **[Fig. 4.4]**, the very goddess that Shivaji is shown praying to before his meeting with Afzal Khan. Thus Afzal Khan is here depicted as an invading, plundering Muslim iconoclast – his religious affiliation is made indisputable by his death cry, "Ya Allah!" – while Shivaji is depicted as a devout, persecuted Hindu forced to defend his faith and his land. After Shivaji emerges victorious from the meeting, "wave after wave of Maratha soldiers" descend from the surrounding hills, raising their war cry **[Fig. 4.5]**. This two-page center spread [Figs. 4.3 and 4.5] featuring the slaying of Afzal Khan and the victorious emergence of Shivaji's troops pairs the Khan's death cry, "Ya Allah!," on the left with the troops' war cry, "Har Har Mahadev!," on the right. But when read sequentially, as the comic book format demands, it becomes clear that these cries are not equally paired. Khan, big though he might be on the left, falls in the first panel on the right, his cry drowned out by the Maratha war cry. It is the latter cry to the Hindu god, rather than the former cry to the Muslim god, that continues to resonate with the reader at the end of these two pages.

In addition to the central episode of the slaying of Afzal Khan, the *Shivaji* comic book also features several other famous episodes: Shivaji's escape from Panhalgarh, which highlights the martyrdom of his loyal captain, Baji Prabhu Deshpande; Shivaji sneaking into the Lal Mahal in Pune and chasing away Shayista Khan, depriving him of three of his fingers in the process; Shivaji's attack on the port city of Surat; and, finally, Shivaji's daring escape in a sweetmeat basket from Agra, where the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb had kept him under house arrest. The *Shivaji* comic ends with Shivaji's coronation ceremony **[Fig. 4.6]**. In this final, full-page panel, Shivaji is seated on a grand throne, surrounded by his supporters who proclaim him to be a "people's king." The final lines read: "As a king he ruled only for five years; but the Maratha power which he had built, flourished for many years after him."[11] Both textually and visually, this final panel is quite similar to the final panel of the mythological *Rama* comic book (no. 15, 1970). Here too the last image is a coronation ceremony, while the text states that the god-king Ram was "crowned king in Ayodhya and he ruled for many years" **[Fig. 4.7]**.[12] Such parallels indicate that, in preparing the visual templates and storyboards for these comics, mythology and history were considered to be complementary rather than oppositional – that together, they tell the "whole truth" of India and its immortal heroes.

The fact that *Shivaji* was the very first historical issue produced in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series suggests that the Maratha king Shivaji is one of the foundational figures of Indian history, at least in the eyes of the creators and consumers of these comic books. In addition to the *Shivaji* issue, *Amar Chitra Katha* has also released a *Tales of Shivaji* issue (no. 268, 1982) that relates several incidents that occurred at his hill-forts, a *Tanaji* issue (no. 40, 1973) that tells the story of Shivaji's Maratha companion Tanaji

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[11] *Shivaji*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 23, op. cit., 32.
[12] *Rama*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 15 (Bombay: India Book House, 1970), 32.

Malusre in more detail, and a *Sambhaji* issue (no. 250, 1981) featuring Shivaji's son. Furthermore, numerous historical figures from all regions of India are compared with Shivaji in this comic book series: In Bundelkhand, Chhatrasal "met and was inspired by Shivaji, and like him was a freedom-loving warrior"; in Assam, "Lachit Barphukan – like Shivaji – fought relentlessly to check the expansion of the Mughal Empire"; and in the Punjab, "Guru Gobind Singh and his Sikhs in the north" worked alongside "Shivaji and his Marathas in the Deccan" to hasten the end of the Mughal empire.[13] By comparing the similar martial qualities of various rulers throughout India with Shivaji's and emphasizing their similar efforts to fight the Mughals, a larger image is created of Indians united in the struggle to "throw off the yoke of alien rule."[14] Shivaji is thus remembered not just as one of the many national heroes who fought for India's independence, but as the foremost among those heroes.

This comic book narrative of Shivaji as a national icon has sparked some controversy. In a brief article published in *The Illustrated Weekly* in 1993, Nancy Adajania wrote that the main culprits that were responsible for stripping historical figures such as Shivaji of their humanity and homogenizing them into superhuman symbols of nationalist history are "comic strips of the *Amar Chitra Katha* variety, and textbooks serving State-licensed curricula for the humanities," whose "ability to parrot a limited number of points allows students to ingest a neat scheme of things. Unconfused by the facts, students thus pass on, having liberated themselves from the burden of studying any real history at all."[15] Adajania argued that the popular images of Shivaji stabbing the

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[13] *Chhatrasal*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 41 (Bombay: India Book House, 1973), inside front cover; *Lachit Barphukan*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 169 (Bombay: India Book House, 1978), inside front cover; *Guru Gobind Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 32 (Bombay: India Book House, 1972), inside front cover.

[14] *Shivaji*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 23, op. cit., inside front cover.

[15] Nancy Adajania, "Myth and Supermyth," *The Illustrated Weekly*, vol. 113 (Apr. 10-16, 1993), 34. For an earlier, but similar critique of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books as vehicles for the teaching of Indian

"treacherous" Afzal Khan and battling "alien" Mughal aggressors are false; the "true" Shivaji, she reminded readers, had levied exorbitant taxes and pillaged territories in Rajputana, the Gangetic plains, Bengal, and the Deccan. He was not a national hero, she suggested, but a regional despot.

This small article created a rather large furor. Both Houses of the Maharashtra legislature resounded with angry protests, as Mangesh Kulkarni has chronicled, and members of the Shiv Sena, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the ruling Congress Party throughout the nation jointly demanded that stern action be taken against *The Illustrated Weekly* and Adajania for offending the sensibilities of the Marathi people.[16] Despite the public apology offered by Anil Dharker,[17] editor of *The Illustrated Weekly*, the issue of the magazine in which Adajania's article appeared was banned, and cases were registered against the editor, publisher, printer, and author under Section 153(A) of the Indian Penal Code, which prescribes "promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion." Although these cases were eventually dismissed by the Bombay High Court, the two-week-long protest of this article by liberal and conservative officials alike testifies to the way in which this historical figure has come to be memorialized as a sacred figure, one whose "proper" memory state officials are now vested in maintaining.

More recently, the controversy surrounding James W. Laine's 2003 book *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* demonstrates that the "proper" memory of Shivaji continues to be policed and protested by multiple parties. In November of 2003, just a few months after the release of Laine's book, the Shiv Sena, a Hindu right-wing regional party based

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history, see Sanjay Joshi and Rajni Bakshi, "ACKs: Distorted History or Education?" *The Telegraph* (Sunday November 13, 1983), 8.

[16] Mangesh Kulkarni, "Politics of Historiography: *The Illustrated Weekly* Case in Retrospect," *The Secularist*, no. 168 (Nov.-Dec. 1997), 126.

[17] Anil Dharker's apology was published in the *Times of India* on April 14, 1993; it was also printed in *The Illustrated Weekly*, vol. 113 (Apr. 24-30, 1993), 6.

in Maharashtra, began to protest both the book and its author. Members of this party have successfully elaborated an image of manly, Marathi-speaking Maharasthrians as the martial guardians of the Hindu nation, with Shivaji as the foremost of the nation's protectors. Angered by the slight to this figure of regional pride that they perceived in Laine's suggestion that Shivaji may not have been as ideal a hero as he is remembered to be, and especially in his questioning of Shivaji's legitimacy and parentage, they accused Laine of casting baseless aspersions and maligning their beloved leader and his mother.[18] Laine's book was withdrawn by its publisher, Oxford University Press, later in November. But the protests didn't stop there.

In early January of 2004, the Sambhaji Brigade attacked the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) in Pune, lashing out at the institution where Laine conducted his research and the librarians, scholars, and other staff members who worked there. A branch of the larger Maratha Seva Sangh organization, members of this non-Brahman group embrace Shivaji as a low-caste king who fought for the upliftment of the low-caste Maratha community. Proponents of "Shiv Dharma," a new religion that rejects Brahmanical Hinduism and regards Shivaji's mother, Jijabai, as its reigning deity, these activists targeted BORI because they blamed S.S. Bahulkar and other Brahman scholars there for misguiding James Laine in his interpretation of Shivaji and held them responsible for the defamation of Shivaji's mother.[19]

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[18] Most controversial was the chapter "Cracks in the Narrative": James W. Laine, *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 89-100. On the controversy surrounding this book, see Ananya Vajpeyi, "The Past and its Passions: Writing History in Hard Times," *Studies in History*, vol. 20, no. 2 (Sage Publications, 2004).

[19] On Shiv Dharma, one can refer to the booklet written in Marathi by A.H. Salunkhe and published by the Maratha Seva Sangh, titled *Gulama cha aani gulam karanaran cha dharm ek nasato* (translated into English by Dr. K. Jamanadas as "Religion of the Slaves and of those who made them Slaves cannot be the same," June 2002). Little academic attention has yet been paid to this new movement.

Despite the apology that Laine tendered to the Indian public via the major newspapers, later in January criminal proceedings were launched against Laine, and his book was banned by the Government of Maharashtra, ruled by an alliance of the Congress Party and the Nationalist Congress Party. In the days following the BORI attack, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee announced his plans to unveil an equestrian statue of Shivaji at the Mumbai airport, recently renamed the Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport, and added that he supported the actions Maharashtrian officials had taken against James Laine.[20]

Equestrian statues of Shivaji with his sword aloft – similar in theme to the *Shivaji* comic book cover – now abound throughout Maharashtra, testimony of the esteem with which Maharashtrians of multiple political, religious, and ideological persuasions regard this seventeenth-century king **[Fig. 4.8]**. Since the Bharatiya Janata Party came into power in the 1990s, Hindu nationalist politicians have increasingly commissioned new Shivaji statues and organized public activities in Shivaji's honor on a national scale.[21] When Union Home Minister L.K. Advani recently unveiled a Shivaji statue in Agra, he stated that he was proud to unveil a statue of the "warrior legend who sowed the seeds of Indian independence," and further noted that it was due to the presence of this statue that, "for a patriot this place now could be another pilgrimage."[22] Thus in this speech Advani not only claimed Shivaji as a national hero, but also suggested that the statue had transformed Agra into a hallowed site. Rather than remembering Agra – home of such

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[20] "Shivaji Is My Ideal, Says Vajpayee," *Mid-Day* (March 20, 2004), online at http://www.mid-day.com/news/nation/2004/march/79192.htm; "PM To Unveil Shivaji Statue," *The Times of India* (September 29, 2004), online at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/421320.cms.

[21] For an article on one artist who has benefited from the increase in statue commissions, see Anosh Malekar, "Bronze Lady," *The Week* (Dec. 12, 1999). Numerous photos can be found in the Indian press of politicians garlanding Shivaji statues and otherwise honoring Shivaji. For a recent photo of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, see *The Tribune* (Chandigarh edition: May 3, 2002), 1.

[22] Deepak Sharma, "Shivaji Dominates Agra Fort Now," *The Pioneer* (Feb. 20, 2001), 1.

architectural testaments to Mughal might as the Taj Mahal and the Agra Fort – as a Mughal city, it could now be remembered as a site of Hindu victory – namely, the site where Shivaji outwitted the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb.

Taken together, these incidents demonstrate how the figure of Shivaji acts as a locus for the articulation of multiple and often contested identities – national, regional, and caste-based – in modern India. They also evidence the public sanctification of this historical figure on multiple fronts. In what follows, I ask how Shivaji acquired such a sanctified status and a many-layered significance. Which previous textual and visual narratives do the comic book producers draw upon to create their "immortal picture story" of Shivaji as a national Indian hero, and why? And can the *Shivaji* comic book – like other commemorations of Shivaji – act as a site for the performance of multiple memories?

MEMORY AND COUNTER-MEMORY: TELLING SHIVAJI NARRATIVES

In his seminal text on the subject of memory, Maurice Halbwachs defined collective memory – what later scholars refer to as "social memory" – as that which "provides the group a self-portrait that unfolds through time, since it is an image of the past, and allows the group to recognize itself throughout the total succession of images."[23] Building upon his work, later scholars like Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn have argued that identity depends upon memory, both individually, in the sense of "a core self that remembers its earlier states," and collectively, in the sense of narratives that construct identities by comparing "once upon a time" with the "here and now."[24] These scholars are not necessarily concerned with the accuracy or "truth" of

[23] Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. by Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 86. Originally published in 1950 in French as *La Memoire Collective*.
[24] Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, "Introduction" to the Special Issue "Memory and Counter-Memory" of *Reproductions*, no. 26 (Spring 1989), 4.

such memories; rather, they view memory as a useful methodology for studying multiple ways of remembering the past, and how those ways of remembering – historical, mythological, and fictitious – all contribute to the process of identity formation. Paul Connerton has argued that because they are not seeking to recover the historical truth, scholars of social memory are therefore freer to examine how a historical event or persona has been interpreted by different groups than are historians, who are primarily concerned with the activity of historical reconstruction.[25] In the following discussion I will examine a variety of colonial, elite nationalist, and subaltern narratives of Shivaji from the late nineteenth century forward. My purpose in examining these narratives is neither to verify nor to disprove the claims made by these groups about Shivaji. Indeed, as James Fentress and Chris Wickham have noted, the transmission of "true" information is only one of the many functions that memory can perform.[26] Rather, my purpose is to attempt to understand how the different self-portraits of these groups have unfolded through time, and how these memories have in turn influenced the narrative choices made in the production of the *Shivaji* comic book.

In 1818, James Mill (1773-1836) wrote of Indians in his *History of British India*:

> This people, indeed, are perfectly destitute of historical records. Their ancient literature affords not a single production to which the historical character belongs. The works in which miraculous transactions of former times are described, are poems. Most of them are books of a religious character, in which the exploits of the gods, and their commands to mortals, are repeated and revealed. In all, the actions of men and those of deities are mixed together, in a set of legends, more absurd and extravagant, more transcending the bounds of nature and reason, less grateful to the imagination and taste of a cultivated and rational people, than those which the fabulous history of any other nation presents to us.[27]

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[25] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 13-14.
[26] James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), xi-xii.
[27] James Mill, *The History of British India*, vol. I (Third edition: London, 1826), 144.

The glorification of Shivaji began in his own lifetime, when his court poet, Kavindra Paramananda, began composing the Sanskrit epic *Śivabhārata*, and others composed Marathi ballads (*povāḍas*) and prose histories (*bakhars*) of Shivaji's battles.[28] In the *Śivabhārata*, the actions of men and those of deities are indeed mixed together in a way that would horrify the likes of James Mill: Shivaji is described as the Lord Vishnu incarnate, present to protect the gods, Brahmans, and cows from Afzal Khan and other Muslims, who are in turn said to be demons incarnate. James Laine, who translated this text into English with S.S. Bahulkar, describes it as "both an historical chronicle, and a laudatory *mahākāvya* (epic poem) in which the poet must describe his hero in a mythic manner conforming to the canons of taste of that genre."[29] In his discussion of this work, S.S. Bahulkar details how the author of the *Śivabhārata* followed the general conventions of historical mahākāvya writing by devoting several cantos to describing the deeds and victories of the hero; describing other literary themes such as the seasons and the sunrise and sunset; and associating the hero with the supernatural powers of gods and goddesses.[30] Disturbed by such perceived genre-mixing, James Mill and other colonial historians believed it was their duty to construct a "real history" of India, and set about doing so by mining sources like the *Śivabhārata* for kernels of historical "truth." But as they worked to separate the "real" Shivaji from the legendary one, these historians

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[28] For a translation of Kavindra Paramananda's *Śivabhārata*, see James W. Laine with S.S. Bahulkar, *The Epic of Shivaji* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2001). For an early English translation of a famous povāḍa by Agrindas called "Afzal Khan Vadh" (1659), see H.A. Acworth, "The Death of Abdulkhan at the Hands of Shiwaji Maharaja" in *The Ballads of the Marathas* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1894), 1-13. For a discussion of many of the bakhars about Shivaji, see D.V. Kale, "Bakhars and Coronation," in B.K. Apte, ed., *Chhatrapati Shivaji: Coronation Tercentenary Commemoration Volume* (Bombay: University of Bombay, 1974), 7-19.

[29] James Laine with S.S. Bahulkar, *The Epic of Shivaji*, op. cit., 8. Unfortunately, this epic poem was never completed. Nonetheless, the mythicization of the hero Shivaji is quite evident in the surviving verses. See, for instance, cantos 18.27-8 and 18.37-8 for a description of Shivaji as a deity incarnate and his Muslim enemies as demons.

[30] S.S. Bahulkar, "The *Śivabhārata* in the Context of Classical *Mahākāvya* Literature," in *The Epic of Shivaji*, trans. by James Laine with S.S. Bahulkar, op. cit., 36.

excised what they considered to be fiction – all references to deities and demons – and left behind the other half of the epic story – the Hindu versus Muslim rhetoric – in their belief that the *Śivabhārata* epic and other precolonial narratives of Shivaji were based on a factual history of communalism.

In 1826 James Grant Duff (1789-1858) published *A History of the Mahrattas*, the first British history of the Maratha people. In this work, Grant Duff sought to portray Shivaji as a human being, not a legendary or divine figure, and attempted to set the record straight in his telling of the encounter between Shivaji and Afzal Khan. Focusing on Shivaji's religiosity, Grant Duff writes that Shivaji attempted to persuade a Hindu Brahman in the employ of Afzal Khan to join his side, telling the Brahman that

> all he had done was for the sake of Hindoos and the Hindoo faith; that he was called on by [Goddess] Bhowanee herself, to protect Bramins and kine, to punish the violators of their temples and their gods, and to resist the enemies of their religion; that it became him as a Bramin to assist in what was already declared by the deity; and that here, amongst his cast and countrymen, he should hereafter live in comfort and affluence.[31]

Grant Duff next relates Shivaji's slaying of Afzal Khan. He reports that, thanks to the efforts of the Brahman, Afzal Khan arrived for the meeting dressed in a thin muslin garment, armed only with his sword, and attended by a single armed follower; Shivaji, on the other hand, "put on a steel chain cap and chain armour under his turban and cotton gown, concealed a crooked dagger, or *beechwa*, in his right sleeve, and on the fingers of his left hand he fixed a *wagnuck*, a treacherous weapon well known among Mahrattas."[32] Shivaji then approached Afzal Khan, stopping frequently along the way so as not to alarm him, "a supposition more likely to be admitted from his [Shivaji's] diminutive size," and as Shivaji and Afzal Khan were introduced, "in the midst of the customary

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[31] James Grant Duff, *A History of the Mahrattas*, vol. I (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1826), 169-170.
[32] James Grant Duff, *History of the Mahrattas*, vol. I, ibid., 171-172.

embrace, the treacherous Mahratta struck the wagnuck into the bowels of Afzool Khan," and then "instantly followed up the blow with his dagger… the whole was the work of a moment, and Sivajee was wresting the weapon from the hand of his victim before their attendants could run towards them."[33] Thus quite the opposite of the comic book's recounting of this incident, which focuses on Afzal Khan's treachery and Shivaji's heroism, Grant Duff viewed Shivaji as the treacherous villain.

After concluding his narrative of Shivaji, Grant Duff gives a summary of Shivaji's character, wherein he again returns to this episode of the slaying of Afzal Khan. In this passage we can see how Grant Duff has excised all references to Shivaji's divinity, yet has retained the dramatic antagonism between Shivaji and Afzal Khan:

> Sivajee's admirers among his own nation speak of him as an incarnation of the Deity, setting an example of wisdom, fortitude, and piety. Mahrattas, in general, consider that necessity authorises a murder, and that political assassination is often wise and proper. They admit that Sivajee authorized the death of Chunder Rao, the Raja of Jowlee; but few of them acknowledge that Afzool Khan was murdered. The vulgar opinion is, that the Khan was the aggressor; and the event is spoken of rather as a commendable exploit than a detestable and treacherous assassination.[34]

Over fifty years later, in 1883, James Douglas (1826-1904) published his *Bombay and Western India*, wherein he similarly characterized Shivaji as a diminutive man, noting his weight of only 112 pounds which "was good riding weight"[35]; as a plunderer, noting that his maxim was "no plunder no pay"[36]; and as a religious, even "superstitious" man, noting that when the English Ambassador, Henry Oxinden, went to Shivaji's fort at Raigarh in 1674 for Shivaji's coronation ceremony, he found that

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[33] James Grant Duff, *History of the Mahrattas*, vol. I, ibid., 172-173.
[34] James Grant Duff, *History of the Mahrattas*, vol. I, ibid., 297.
[35] James Douglas, *Bombay and Western India*, vol. I (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., 1893 [1883]), 337-338.
[36] James Douglas, *Bombay and Western India*, vol. I, ibid., 331 and 342-343.

> Sivaji had gone on a pilgrimage to Pratapgarh to a pagoda of the goddess Bhavani, and Oxinden and his companions were detained *a month* in the Fort, until his idle ceremonies at Raigarh were accomplished. He was mightily imbued with his religious rites and ceremonies, and would do anything to carry them through.[37]

Furthermore, James Douglas also describes Shivaji's victory over Afzal Khan as premeditated murder. Citing Sir Charles Napier, Douglas writes: "Sivaji, the founder of the Maratha power, met Afzul Khan, the Bijapur general, at an arranged conference, pretending to embrace him, and having previously armed his own hands with steel claws – the *wagnak* – tore him open."[38] He calls this one of Shivaji's "two great crimes," the other being Shivaji's killing of the Raja of Jauli. In his historical narrative of Shivaji then, Douglas, like Grant Duff before him, designates Shivaji as the treacherous villain. Furthermore, he likewise takes pains to excise all references to Shivaji as a divine character and retains as factual the Hindu-Muslim antagonism of earlier epic and oral narratives of Shivaji. An example of this communalism can be found in Douglas' tale of star-crossed lovers. He recounts that the daughter of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb fell desperately in love with Shivaji while he was held captive by Aurangzeb in 1666, and that Shivaji was similarly besotted with her. However, the marriage "could not go on because the King of the Marathas would not become Muslim. Aurangzeb was angry, naturally so: but when people have a religion it is difficult to change it."[39] Ultimately, according to Douglas, Shivaji chose his religion, Hinduism, over the beautiful princess, and in so doing guaranteed lifelong enmity between himself and the Emperor.

In final confirmation of Shivaji's despicable character, James Douglas concludes his history of Shivaji by commenting on the lack of regard for Shivaji in his day:

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[37] James Douglas, *Bombay and Western India*, vol. I, ibid., 335-336. Emphasis original.
[38] James Douglas, *Bombay and Western India*, vol. I, ibid., 341.
[39] James Douglas, *Bombay and Western India*, vol. I, ibid., 349.

> No man now cares for Sivaji. Over all those wide domains, which once owned him lord and master, acquired by so much blood and treasure, and which he handed down with care to the Rajas of Kolapur, the Bhonsles of Satara, and their Peshwahs in Poona, not one man now contributes a rupee to keep or repair the tomb of the founder of the Maratha Empire.[40]

This comment did not go unnoticed.

As the British investigated and recorded the Indian past, they assimilated Indian history to the history of Great Britain, resulting in a history that, according to Ranajit Guha, was henceforth used as a measure of difference between the colonizer and the colonized.[41] In this context, nationalist Indian historiography arose as a form of resistance in a "simultaneous relationship of affinity with and opposition to colonialist historiography."[42] Several scholars have written of the sudden production of nationalist histories by Indians in late-nineteenth-century Bengal. Discussing the work of Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj has argued that he and others writing in Bengal at this time discovered the constructedness of historical "truth": that in telling the history of India, the British were constructing an image of a people whose whole history destined them for British conquest – or, as Bankimchandra put it, that the lion is always shown being defeated because it was man who painted the picture.[43] Bankimchandra realized that history was not just the chronological arrangement of events, but also the narrative arrangement of stories through which those events attain meaning. He and

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[40] James Douglas, *Bombay and Western India*, vol. II, ibid., 179-180.

[41] Ranajit Guha, "Dominance without Hegemony and Its Historiography," *Subaltern Studies VI*, ed. by Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 211-212.

[42] Ranajit Guha, "Dominance without Hegemony," ibid., 212. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations* (vol. 37, Winter 1992), 1-26.

[43] Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of a Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 107-109; see also Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 76-77.

other Bengali historians therefore set out to paint a new self-portrait, highlighting the deeds of their ancestors in order to show the ability of the lion to defeat the man.[44]

In Western India as well, Indians in the late nineteenth century also began to write their own national histories, the vast majority of which centered upon Shivaji.[45] Justice M.G. Ranade (1842-1901) heard James Douglas's lament about the state of neglect that Shivaji's tomb (*samadhi*) was in, and initiated a movement to restore it and, with it, the proper memory of Shivaji. In May of 1885, Ranade convened a gathering of Pune aristocrats to petition for restoration funds. In response, Lord Reay, Governor of Bombay, set aside four rupees to clear the historic plinth of weeds and to erect a railing to keep out cattle.[46] After this victory Ranade continued his work, publishing *Rise of the Maratha Power* in 1900 to challenge the colonial portrayal of Shivaji's regime:

> There are many who think that there can be no particular moral significance in the story of the rise and fall of a freebooting Power, which thrived by plunder and adventure, and succeeded only because it was the most cunning and adventurous among all those who helped to dismember the Great Moghul Empire after the death of Aurangzeb. This is a very common feeling with the readers, who derive their knowledge of these events solely from the works of English historians.[47]

In this work, Ranade argued that the formation of a Maratha kingdom in the late seventeenth century was the beginning of the modern process of nation making. He characterized it as an upheaval of the whole population, "strongly bound together by the common affinities of language, race, religion and literature, and seeking further solidarity

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[44] Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness*, op. cit.

[45] Rosalind O'Hanlon notes that a striking feature of Marathi vernacular literature – particularly in the new genres of historical fiction novels and historical plays – towards the end of the nineteenth century is the sudden surge of interest in the Maratha warrior hero, Shivaji, and his feats of leadership in the great expansions of Maratha power that took place in the seventeenth century. See her *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 164.

[46] Richard I. Cashman, *The Myth of the* Lokamanya*: Tilak and Mass Politics in Maharashtra* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 101.

[47] M.G. Ranade, *Rise of the Maratha Power* (Bombay: Punalekar & Co., 1900), 1.

by a common independent political existence."[48] He argued that this was the first experiment of its kind in India, and described it as the work

> of the people, of the masses, and not of the classes. At its head were Saints and Prophets, Poets and Philosophers, who sprang chiefly from the lower orders of society – tailors, carpenters, potters, gardeners, shopkeepers, barbers, and even *mahars* – more often than Brahmans.[49]

Ranade hoped that just as Shivaji had united disparate forces in the struggle for independence from the Mughals, so might Brahmans and non-Brahmans again unite behind Shivaji in a heroic struggle for independence from the British.[50]

Although Ranade disagreed with the British portrayal of Shivaji as a plunderer and murderer, he did agree with their historiographic effort to depict him as a human figure, rather than as an incarnation of the deity.[51] In his discussion of the encounter with Afzal Khan, therefore, Ranade is careful to recover Shivaji's human motivations. He points out that whereas the British charge Shivaji with treachery, the Marathi chronicles allege that Shivaji was only acting in self-defense; indeed they claim that he was guided by the divine sword that Goddess Bhavani had presented to him. Ranade's own opinion, however, is that both the English and the Marathi historians have overstated their cases. He argues that the practice of treachery was common in those days, thus it may be presumed that both Afzal Khan and Shivaji were prepared for such a risk.[52] This mediating opinion has little in common with the later claims of the *Shivaji* comic book, which clearly fingers Afzal Khan as the treacherous one.

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[48] M.G. Ranade, *Rise of the Maratha Power*, ibid., 6-7.
[49] M.G. Ranade, *Rise of the Maratha Power*, ibid., 10.
[50] Richard Cashman has cogently argued that for Ranade the Shivaji tradition was a means of enhancing the position of the Pune elite by suggesting the essential compatibility of the interests of the various castes and classes, as well as the legitimacy of the educated Brahmans to lead their society and to be recognized by the British as the spokesmen of Maratha society. See his *Myth of the* Lokamanya, op. cit., 104.
[51] See Richard Cashman, *Myth of the* Lokamanya, ibid., 103-104.
[52] M.G. Ranade, *Rise of the Maratha Power*, op. cit., 97-98.

In 1895, Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) took up the Shivaji memorial cause. An aspiring nationalist leader, Tilak also hoped that Shivaji might be the non-Brahman personage behind whom all the castes and classes of Western India – and all Hindus across the nation – could unite.[53] He convened a meeting in Pune to raise further funds for the reparation of Shivaji's *samadhi*, including the erection of a *chatra* ("parasol," a sign of royalty and divinity), and for an endowment for an annual commemorative festival. As editor of the Marathi-language newspaper *Kesari*, Tilak was able to publicize the memorial movement in the newspaper. Richard Cashman has discussed in detail his campaign to collect donations, noting that Tilak enlisted the support of wealthy and common figures alike by acknowledging every donation, large and small, in *Kesari*. By August of 1895, just three months after the fund was launched, 6,000 rupees had been donated by over 15,000 people, and by December the total had reached 15,000 rupees from nearly 60,000 contributors.[54] The campaign was so successful that the first Shivaji festival was held at the Raigarh hill-fort the very next year, from April 15 to 17, 1896.

Like the festival commemorating the Putsch – the "blood baptism" of 1923 – that is described by Paul Connerton, at the Shivaji festival also historical events were transfigured by mythicization into a narrative of struggle, sacrifice, and victory.[55] The major events of Shivaji's life – especially his victory over Afzal Khan and his coronation ceremony – were re-enacted through a variety of media, allowing those present to

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[53] A member of the "Extremist" party of the Indian National Congress (as opposed to the "Moderate" party that Ranade was a member of), Tilak had previously sought to use the annual Ganapati Hindu religious festival as a setting for nationalist agitation, for while the British often suppressed outright political meetings at this time, they traditionally observed a hands-off policy with regard to religious meetings and festivals. On Tilak and the Ganapati festival, see Raminder Kaur, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: The Ganapati Festival and Media Competitions in Mumbai," *Polygraph* (vol. 12: World Religions and Media Cultures, 2000), 137-158; Victor Barnouw, "The Changing Character of a Hindu Festival," *American Anthropologist* (NS 56, no. 1, Feb. 1954), 74-86; and Richard Cashman, "The Political Recruitment of God Ganapati," in *Myth of the* Lokamanya, op. cit., 75-97.

[54] Richard Cashman, *Myth of the* Lokamanya, ibid., 106-107.

[55] On the Putsch festival as a "cult enacted," see Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, op. cit., 42-43.

participate in the performance of the new nationalist historiography. Devotional songs and plays like Anna Martand Joshi's *Victory to Shiva Chhatrapati* celebrated the slaying of Afzal Khan in order to demonstrate Shivaji's ability to rid the land of "foreigners."[56] Another relatively new and very successful medium that was used to disseminate the new narrative to the larger public was that of poster art.

MEMORY AND COUNTER-MEMORY: SHOWING SHIVAJI NARRATIVES

Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) was a self-trained artist whose narrative paintings of mythological and historical subjects received praise from both Orientalists and nationalists, and eventually a large middle-class audience as well, during his lifetime.[57] Orientalists, who felt that such narrative paintings in the realist mode would work for the moral upliftment of their subjects, praised Ravi Varma as a non-European who had mastered academic art.[58] Nationalists, on the other hand, praised Varma for his great contribution to the project of nation-building, exclaiming that his narrative paintings fulfilled the function of art, which was to serve the historical purpose of reconstructing the glorious past of the country, and the moral purpose of elevating the thoughts and

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[56] Prachi Deshpande, "Brave Warriors, Damsels in Distress: Nation, Region and Gender in Marathi Historical Fiction," paper read at the 31st Annual Conference on South Asia, The University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2002. The popularity of such plays is evident from her comment that the actor Chintaman Kolhatkar recalled that audiences used to go crazy the minute he appeared on stage, before he had a chance to say a word.

[57] Ravi Varma's impact on Indian popular culture, and especially on the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books, is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

[58] On moral upliftment and art, see the speech given by Lord Napier in 1871, in which he urged Indian artists to "engage the service of the national pencil as they have fastened on the national memory and animated the national voice." See E.M.J. Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma* (Government of Kerala: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1981), 13. On Orientalist praise of Ravi Varma, consider the awards he received in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, where he was chosen to represent India. One award recognized that Varma's paintings were "true to nature in form and colour"; the other recognized the "ethnographic value" of his paintings. See Partha Mitter, "Artist as Charismatic Individual: Raja Ravi Varma" in *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 198-199; E.M.J. Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, op. cit., 32.

emotions of its viewers.[59] Shortly after Ravi Varma agreed to the request of a nationalist author in Bombay for a painting of Shivaji's coronation,[60] he found that both nationalists and Orientalists were quickly employing his images of Shivaji in the process of creating two very different self-portraits. Colonial historian H.G. Rawlinson, for instance, used a portrait of Shivaji that was allegedly painted by Ravi Varma as the frontispiece to his *Shivaji the Maratha: His Life and Times* (1915).[61] For Rawlinson and other colonial historians, such paintings had value only as illustrations for their textual narratives. For Bal Gangadhar Tilak, however, images of Shivaji had a far greater potential.

When Tilak saw Varma's "Shivaji Maharaj" painting **[Fig. 4.9]**, he remarked that, unlike prevailing images of Shivaji, "this painting takes the view of eighteenth-century politics… Looking at [it] one immediately thinks of the whole… of the great warrior. So he must be congratulated."[62] In this image, Shivaji sits astride his horse, leading his Maratha soldiers through the hills of Maharashtra. They appear to have just left the fort that sits atop the hill in the background, and are now on their way to engage in another battle, for the soldiers behind Shivaji hold their weapons aloft, as if – again – united in the cry: "Har Har Mahadev!" By referring to eighteenth-century politics in his discussion of this painting, Tilak perhaps suggests that Varma was not influenced by the colonial (mis)perception of Shivaji, but instead saw him in his precolonial context as a great

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[59] For instance, see the anonymous article published in the first issue of *The Modern Review* (Calcutta), which paid tribute to Ravi Varma after his death in 1906: "Ravi Varma," *The Modern Review*, vol. I (Jan. 1907), 86.

[60] See E.M. J. Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, op. cit., 38-40. This figure is unnamed, and the painting, if completed, is no longer extant.

[61] H.G. Rawlinson, *Shivaji the Maratha: His Life and Times* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915). Rawlinson discusses this portrait only in his preface, where he writes: "I have to acknowledge my indebtedness to Rao Bahadur B.A. Gupte, Curator of the Victoria Memorial Exhibition, Calcutta, for permission to reproduce the picture of Shivaji, by Raja Ravi Varma, said to be copied from a contemporary Dutch print." The painting is unfortunately no longer extant.

[62] Cited in Partha Mitter, "Artist as Charismatic Individual," op. cit., p. 204, note 82; see also N.B. Nayar, *Raja Ravi Varma* (Trivandrum, 1953), 90.

leader. Tilak's comment that one immediately thinks of the whole Shivaji narrative when one looks at this frozen moment suggests that he agreed that narrative, figural images combining realism and idealism could remind the viewer of the glorious past, valorize previous struggles, and even suggest the possibility of future victory. Indeed, recognizing the power that such heroic images could have in disseminating his nationalist message beyond elite audiences, Tilak arranged for a portrait of Shivaji to be unveiled at the festival in 1896, and a procession of the portraits of Shivaji and Saint Ramdas – said to be Shivaji's guru – was held on the first day.[63] Through the procession of these popular lithographs, devotional ballads, scripture recitations, and prayer offerings, the 1896 Shivaji festival took on the character of a Hindu religious festival, with the historical figure of Shivaji cast once again as a mythological hero fighting invading demons in order to protect Hindu *dharma* and the people's freedom.

Seeking a larger audience for his paintings, one that went beyond elite spheres and extended to the modernizing middle classes, Ravi Varma and his brother, Raja Raja Varma, started the Ravi Varma Lithographic Press in 1894. Not only did Justice Ranade help the brothers find financial backing for this venture,[64] but an incident in his court also confirmed their belief in the urgent need for improving the quality of art available to the masses. Just after the press had been started, the Varmas witnessed a case in the Bombay High Court in which a vendor of German oleographs depicting nude women was tried for obscenity. Justices Ranade and John Jardine ruled that, in general, naked pictures of

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[63] Richard Cashman, *Myth of the* Lokamanya, op. cit., 109. Tilak was moved by other artists' images of Shivaji as well; Charles Heimsath has described the Poona Chitrashala Press, which was founded in 1878 by Visnu Krisna Chiplonkar and produced a number of Shivaji images, as "probably the single most important personal influence on [Bal Gangadhar Tilak's] thinking." See Christopher Pinney, "The Nation (Un)Pictured? Chromolithography and 'Popular' Politics in India, 1878-1995," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 23 (Summer 1997), 836.

[64] Unable to finance the Ravi Varma Lithographic Press on his own, Ravi Varma consulted with his friend M.G. Ranade, who helped Varma to find a financial partner in the Bombay industrialist Govardhandas Khatau Makhanji. See E.M.J. Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, op. cit., 30.

classical subjects were not obscene because the artists had higher ideals than merely exciting spectators; these particular pictures, however, were not deemed ideal enough (due to the introduction of modern silk umbrellas and apparel) to be placed among the classical nudes.[65] In his ongoing effort to wean the masses from such bazaar works, Ravi Varma released lithographs of many of his paintings. At the time of the Shivaji festival organized by Tilak in 1896, the Ravi Varma Lithographic Press put out lithographs of Shivaji, Tilak, and Ranade. Even after Ravi Varma had sold his press, along with the right of reproduction of 89 of his paintings, to the German technician Fritz Schleicher in 1901 due to ongoing financial difficulties, the posters of Shivaji and Tilak continued to be issued by the press in recognition of their overwhelming popularity in Maharashtra.[66]

Ravi Varma's success in reaching a larger middle-class audience is phenomenal. As discussed in my third chapter, Varma is one of the foremost progenitors of popular Indian art today, including Indian comic books.[67] The cover of the *Shivaji* comic book – which is quite similar to Varma's "Shivaji Maharaj" print in its composition and its combination of iconic and narrative modes – demonstrates Varma's continued influence. And indeed, all of the comic book artists I interviewed were quite familiar with Varma's style, and several admitted looking to his many lithographs that continue to be reproduced for inspiration. Artist Ram Waeerkar, for instance, discussed the importance

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[65] Cited in E.M.J. Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, ibid., 34-35; see also Partha Mitter, "Artist as Charismatic Individual," op. cit., 209. Mitter notes that it was in light of this case, and in their efforts to elevate public taste, that the Varmas did not paint nudes but instead restricted themselves to "coy eroticism," with the female figure tantalizingly revealed by a semi-transparent sari. For a further discussion of the feminine ideal in Indian art from this period forward, see Chapter 3.

[66] E.M.J. Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, op. cit., 38-40.

[67] See Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger, *Popular Indian Art: Ravi Varma and the Printed Gods of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); also R. Nandakumar, "Ravi Varma and His Relevance: An Art-Historical Revaluation," in Ratan Parimoo, ed., *The Legacy of Raja Ravi Varma, the Painter* (Exhibition Catalogue; Baroda: Maharaja Fatesingh Museum Trust, 1998); and A. Ramachandran, "Raja Ravi Varma Exhibition – A Prologue," in R.C. Sharma, ed., *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives* (Exhibition Catalogue; New Delhi: National Museum, 1993).

of having a large visual reference library for the comic artists that included the works of Ravi Varma and other artists:

> We use all the references, whatever reference is there we look at, from all the artists. Ravi Varma, S.M. Pandit, all artists. At first there were not enough. We [at *ACK*] had to start a library, build up the references. And I have my own references at home. Many references are necessary because there are many frames for each character. 150 frames, and they must be done quickly. So I look at all the references for that character. Then I make the drawings, very fast. I am the fastest artist… But not just Indian references, not just Ravi Varma. Also there is [Fortunino] Matania, and American comic artists, all of these I look at too.[68]

Pratap Mulick, the artist who created the *Shivaji* comic book cover image, has worked for years for *Amar Chitra Katha*, and has also freelanced for the Delhi-based *Raj* and *Manosh* comic book series. A native Maharashtrian, Mulick takes pride in the *Shivaji* cover, and has also created a number of Shivaji oil paintings, including a recent series of eleven 11' by 8' paintings of Shivaji's life that was commissioned by a Pune-based company. When I asked him about his influences, Mulick listed a series of American comics artists, including John Prentice (of "Rip Kirby" comic strip fame) and Hal Foster ("Prince Valiant"). I next asked about Indian influences, including Ravi Varma, and his reply was brief and almost dismissive: "Of course, Ravi Varma, other Indians. All Indian painters know other Indians' work. I have many books, many posters around to look at."[69] Like Christopher Pinney has commented, for more than a century now similar images have "pictured the nation of India" and shaped social memories:

> The creation of popular visual symbols is facilitated by the archives of early images maintained by most commercial artists. These ensure the circulation of these images and prevent their sedimentation. Forming part of a relatively closed repertoire, they migrate endlessly, cutting back and forth across new times and contexts.[70]

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[68] Ram Waeerkar, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, October 23, 2001.

[69] Pratap Mulick, interviewed by the author in Pune, January 21, 2001.

[70] Christopher Pinney, "The Nation (Un)Pictured?" op. cit., 835. Also see Stephen Inglis' discussion of the recycling of images within artistic lineages in his article on the poster artist C. Kondiah Raju: "Suitable for

The popular lithographs of Shivaji by Ravi Varma and other artists, along with the plays and devotional ballads, helped Tilak bring his message to the local masses in the Bombay Presidency, and to a larger pan-Indian audience as well. Tilak organized Shivaji festivals throughout the Deccan and exclaimed in newspaper editorials that Shivaji was a national hero, one that all Indians – or at least all Hindus – should embrace in their national struggle against the British.[71] Judging from an anonymous editorial that ran on January 5, 1896, in the English-language newspaper *Mahratta*, these efforts were intended to both counter the British attempt to downplay the memorial movement by characterizing Shivaji as an insignificant figure on the national scale, and to increase local awareness of the central role that Marathas could have in the national struggle:

> It has been insinuated by some of the Anglo-Indian critics of the Shivaji Memorial movement that it is only a Mahratta movement and that other nationalities feel not the least sympathy for it… Last Sunday's meeting proved beyond all doubt that the movement had the fullest sympathy of the people of all parts of India. It proved that under the *Pax Britannica* the Bengali in spite of the Mahratta ditch, the Madrasi in spite of Shivaji's unkind treatment of his ancestors, the Guzerati in spite of being "royally looted" were prepared to forget the past and honour the greatest Indian hero of modern times… [I]t is clear that the name of Shivaji is honoured all over India and that the country is prepared to do homage to the genius that successfully defended the Hindu faith against the persecution of the Mahomedans.[72]

Works such as Rabindranath Tagore's poems "Pratinidhi" (1897) and "Shivaji Utsav" (1904) give some indication that the plea that Shivaji be recognized as a national hero had at least a limited sway outside of Western India.[73] In fact, fearing that the Shivaji

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Framing: The Work of a Modern Master" in L. Babb and S. Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 51-75.

[71] For an account of the Shivaji festivals in the Deccan, see Anil Samarth, *Shivaji and the Indian National Movement* (Bombay: Somaiya Publications, 1975), 20-57.

[72] Anonymous editorial, *Mahratta*, January 5, 1896.

[73] On the reception of Shivaji outside of Western India, see the collection of essays in *Chhatrapati Shivaji: Architect of Freedom*, ed. by Kulkarnee, op. cit.; also Lala Lajpat Rai's biography of Shivaji, *Sevaji,* originally published in Urdu in 1896, which has been translated into English by R.C. Puri as *Shivaji, the Great Patriot* (New Delhi: Metropolitan, 1980).

movement was gaining too much momentum too quickly, the British Raj charged Tilak with sedition in 1898, prosecuting him and other regional newspaper editors for "giving a political turn" to the Shivaji celebration by publishing articles that encouraged the use of the festival as an occasion to "attempt to excite disaffection to the present rulers."[74]

The sedition charge against Tilak revolved in part around his interpretation of the slaying of Afzal Khan. Like Ranade, Tilak and the other members of the organizing committee of the Shivaji festival believed that the Orientalist historians' characterization of Shivaji as a murderer was unacceptable – but Tilak pushed the issue farther. In June of 1897, at a gathering held to commemorate Shivaji's birth, Professor Bhanu of Fergusson College argued in a lecture that in killing Afzal Khan, Shivaji was not a murderer because he was above the usual canons of morality, for he was fighting for the larger cause of Maratha freedom. Commenting on this speech in *Kesari*, Tilak similarly defended Shivaji's act by agreeing that great men are above common principles of morality:

> Did Shivaji commit a sin in killing Afzal Khan? The answer to this question can be found in Mahabharata itself. Shrimat Krishna preached in the *Gita* that we have a right even to kill our own *guru* and our kinsmen. No blame attaches to any person if he is doing his deeds without being actuated by a desire to reap the fruit of his deeds.[75]

On the evidence of this and other *Kesari* editorials, Tilak was given a six-year-long "transportation" sentence.

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[74] Extracts from the Home Dept., Public A., May 1898, Nos. 345-376. Reprinted as Appendix I in *Chhatrapati Shivaji: Architect of Freedom*, ed. by N. Kulkarnee, op. cit., 227-338.

[75] *Kesari*, June 15, 1897 (Marathi), quoted in Richard Cashman, *Myth of the* Lokamanya, op. cit., 113-114. This was apparently a very powerful moral judgment, for W.C. Rand, a British military officer with a reputation for severity as the head of the plague administration during the bubonic epidemic that struck the Deccan in 1896, was shot by Damodar Chaphekar a week after Professor Bhanu's speech had been delivered and Tilak's editorial had been printed. Chaphekar stated that he and his associates were moved by the Shivaji festival and Tilak's narrative of Shivaji's life to take such measures in their quest to overthrow the colonial regime. Rand's death was one of the primary reasons for the British Raj's concern with the growing Shivaji movement. See Rajendra Vora, "Maharashtra Dharma and the Nationalist Movement in Maharashtra," in *Writers, Editors and Reformers: Social and Political Transformations of Maharashtra, 1830-1930*, ed. by N.K. Wagle (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999), 23-30; and Richard Cashman, *Myth of the* Lokamanya, op. cit., 112-116.

The presentation of the encounter between Shivaji and Afzal Khan in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book narrative is indebted to Tilak's nationalist narrative of events in a number of ways. Despite a long-standing editorial policy of minimizing violence, the slaying of Afzal Khan is prominently featured and even morally justified in the comic book.[76] As had Tilak, so have the creators of the comic book resorted to the *Bhagavad Gita* in order to defend Shivaji's actions. In the early discussion featured between Shivaji and his mother, our young hero is taught the *Gita*'s lesson that fighting is at times an inescapable duty, and that "even death in the cause of one's duty should be dear to a hero's heart."[77] In other ways, as well, the comic's depiction of the encounter draws more upon Tilak's heroic narrative of Shivaji than any other. For instance, as in all of the narratives discussed above, Shivaji is a small, wiry character in the comic book, while Afzal Khan is enormous. But the differing size of the two characters is here meant to suggest a David versus Goliath scenario, where the righteous man, no matter how small, is ultimately able to overcome the oppressive giant. Thus Afzal Khan's treachery is doubly articulated in the comic book: visually through his enormous size and the knife he attempts to stab into Shivaji's back; textually through his double-speak, his habit of saying one thing while thinking another. Similarly, Shivaji's innocence and bravery are doubly-articulated: visually through his small size, his courageous approach, and his hesitancy to fight without provocation; and textually through the verbal explanation that Shivaji wore armor and carried a weapon only because he had been informed that Afzal Khan would try to kill him.

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[76] For more on the comic book producers' philosophy of violence, see Chapter 5.
[77] *Shivaji*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 23, op. cit., 3.

MEMORY AND COUNTER-MEMORY: COUNTER-NARRATIVES OF SHIVAJI

British fears of the momentum of Tilak's movement aside, however, Tilak encountered significant resistance to his efforts to take his history of Shivaji to the masses. One of the strongest points of contention was the Kshatriya caste status assigned to Shivaji in Tilak's narrative. Shivaji's status as a Kshatriya was disputed during his lifetime, when Shivaji and his supporters sought to confer the title of "Chhatrapati" upon him at his coronation ceremony in 1674. This title, which literally means "Lord of the Umbrella," denotes one who is entitled to have a *chatra*, an umbrella or parasol, a sign of royalty and/or divinity. In practical terms, the title would signify that Shivaji was an independent monarch, no longer a vassal. But in order to be invested with this title, Shivaji first had to be declared to be a pure Kshatriya, the varna of kings. Some Brahmans objected, arguing on Purāṇic grounds that it was nearly impossible in the present era for any family to prove pure Kshatriya descent, as the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, Parashuram, had earlier eliminated all Kshatriyas. Shivaji employed Gaga Bhatt, a Marathi Brahman living in Banaras, to investigate the Bhonsle lineage. He declared that they were directly descended from the Sisodia Rajput kings (undisputed Kshatriyas), and that Shivaji was therefore of the Solar lineage, descended from the god-king Ram. His genealogy thus established, the coronation ceremony proceeded, and Shivaji was from then on known as the Chhatrapati.[78]

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[78] See Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology*, op. cit., 19-20; Jadunath Sarkar, *Shivaji and His Times* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1973), 202-211; Sri Ram Sharma, "Shivaji's Coronation: Some Reflections," in B.K. Apte, ed., *Chhatrapati Shivaji*, op. cit., 1-6; and B.K. Apte, "The Need for Coronation," in B.K. Apte, ed., *Chhatrapati Shivaji*, ibid., 20-24. This *varna* drama recurred in the early-nineteenth century, when a dispute arose between elite Maratha families descended from Shivaji and Chitpavan Brahmans over the Maratha families' *varna* status. As in the seventeenth century, the Brahmans maintained that because there could be no true Kshatriyas in the present age, the Marathas were Shudras. For further information on the revival of this dispute between the Brahman Peshwas and the non-Brahman Maratha families, see Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology*, op. cit., 24-25.

By the time of the nineteenth century, with the racial theory of Indian civilization on the ascendant, colonial officials and many elite Indians agreed that the Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya varnas were descendants of the "invading" Aryans, while Shudras and untouchables were descendants of the conquered "native" inhabitants of India. Both Ranade and Tilak accepted this theory, viewing Aryans as culturally and morally superior to non-Aryans: Dravidians, Shudras, untouchables, tribals, and Muslims.[79] Both Tilak and Ranade described Shivaji as a Kshatriya – and thus Aryan – king who, together with his spiritual advisor, Saint Ramdas – a Brahman and thus also an Aryan – had established an independent Maharashtrian nation.[80] Although they believed that Shivaji and Ramdas together symbolized the potential for Brahmans and non-Brahmans to unite, many others felt that this vision of unity excluded non-Aryans.

A second, related point of contention was the role that Ramdas (1608-81) was given in the nationalist histories. Ranade described Ramdas as Shivaji's spiritual advisor, and wrote that it was Ramdas who encouraged Shivaji to unite all Maharashtrians together and to propagate the dharma of Maharashtra.[81] Tilak similarly believed Ramdas to be Shivaji's spiritual advisor, and therefore took care to include references to him in public commemorations of Shivaji through the parading of a portrait of Ramdas alongside Shivaji's portrait and the recitation of Ramdas' writings before the masses at the Shivaji festival. But by attributing Shivaji's success to his Brahman advisor, the

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[79] See Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India: 1873-1930* (Bombay: Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1976), esp. p. 103. On the racial theory of Indian civilization, see Thomas Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Ronald Inden, "Orientalist Constructions of India," *Modern Asian Studies* 20.3 (1986), 401-446; Romila Thapar, ed., *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1995); R.S. Sharma, *Looking for the Aryans* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1995); and George Erdosy, *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language, Material Culture, and Ethnicity* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995).

[80] See Richard Cashman, *Myth of the* Lokamanya, op. cit., esp. pp. 98 and 103.

[81] M.G. Ranade, *Rise of the Maratha Power*, op. cit., 143.

narratives of Ranade and Tilak – both Brahmans themselves – alienated many within the non-Brahman communities that they had hoped to include in their nationalist agendas.

Jotirao Phule (1827-90), a leading non-Brahman activist in Maharashtra, disagreed with the Brahmanical depiction of Shivaji as a protector of cows and Brahmans.[82] In his *Chhatrapati Shivaji Raje Bhosleyanche Povada* ("Ballad of the Raja Chhatrapati Shivaji Bhonsle," 1869), he depicted Shivaji as a non-Brahman ruler who protected the common man. In this ballad and his book *Gulamagiri* ("Slavery," 1873), Phule argued that if the Aryans had invaded India, then the elites of his day who claimed Aryan descent were invaders who had enslaved the natives of India through their caste system and religion. He also maintained that the masses – peasants, tribals, Shudras, and untouchables – were the original inhabitants of India. As such, he called into question the rising nationalist demand for Brahman–non-Brahman unity.[83] Pairing Shivaji's past righteous wrath against Muslim "invaders" with the Shudras' current righteous wrath against Brahman "invaders," Phule skillfully crafted a counter-narrative of Shivaji for those disenfranchised by the elite nationalist movement. As Rosalind O'Hanlon argues, the meaning of Shivaji for Phule lay neither in the protection of orthodox Hindu religious symbols, nor in the establishment of an independent Hindu nation. Rather, Shivaji was a means of conveying the glorious martial past of the lower castes of Maharashtra.[84]

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[82] Although beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting that many Muslims were also alienated from the nationalist narrative of Shivaji. See, for instance, Saiyid Tafazzul Daud's *The Real Sevaji*, (reprint: Karachi: Indus Publications, 1980), originally published in 1935 by the Popular Printing Works of Allahabad, in which he uses Orientalist sources to argue that "Maharashtra has not produced a more cruel and atrocious person than Sevaji" (p. 187). This book created a sensation in Maharashtra in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and was eventually banned by the Government of India in 1945. See also Anil Samarth, "The Real Sevaji," in *Chhatrapati Shivaji: Architect of Freedom*, ed. by Kulkarnee, op. cit., 99-108.

[83] Jotirao G. Phule, *Gulamagiri: Slavery in the Civilised British Government under the Cloak of Brahmanism*, trans. by P.G. Patil (Bombay: Education Dept., Govt. of Maharashtra for Mahatma Jotirao Phule Death Centenary Central Committee, 1991); and Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society*, op. cit., 114.

[84] Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology*, op. cit., 173-174.

Phule founded the Marathi-language newspaper *Din Bandhu* in 1877 to act as a counterforce to the Brahman-run *Kesari* and *Mahratta* newspapers. As Tilak's Shivaji movement was gaining momentum, *Din Bandhu* launched a campaign against the nationalist, Brahmanic interpretation of Shivaji. Under the direction of its editor and non-Brahman activist, Narayanrao Meghaji Lokhande, editorials ran in the newspaper arguing that the memorial was in danger of being transformed into a temple, and Shivaji into another incarnated Hindu god. Fearing that a heroically sculpted statue of Shivaji could too easily be transformed into a figure of mythological proportions, these non-Brahman protestors wrote that instead of a heroic sculptural complex complete with a lingam and priest, the memorial should be created along the lines of the "secular memorials" designed for George Washington, the Duke of Wellington, and Napoleon.[85]

What is particularly fascinating about this comment is that the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C. (completed in 1884), the Wellington Monument in Dublin (completed in 1861), and the Vendome Column in Paris (completed in 1810; re-erected in 1873) are all monolithic stone obelisks. I believe that by advocating a non-figurative, abstract memorial, these non-Brahmans hoped to allow for multiple memories and to resist the elite effort to recast Shivaji as a deity incarnate in the burgeoning myth of the nation-state. For, as James Young noted in his discussion of the Warsaw Ghetto Monument, "the specificity of realistic figuration [seems] to thwart multiple messages, while abstract sculpture [accommodates] as many meanings as could be projected onto it."[86] Nonetheless, appeals for a non-figurative memorial were dismissed by the elite Hindu community, as was Phule's narrative of Shivaji as a Shudra king, the historicity of

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[85] Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology*, ibid., 295-296; see also *Din Bandhu* on June 23 and July 14, 1895.

[86] James E. Young "The Biography of a Memorial Icon: Nathan Rapoport's Warsaw Ghetto Monument," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 101.

which was publicly questioned. The Daksina Prize Fund Committee, for instance, rejected Phule's ballad, awarding its prize to another work deemed more accurate. In this work, *The Advice Given to Maharaj Shivaji by Dadoji Kondadev* (1877), Ekanath Annaji Joshi emphasized the role of Brahman spiritual advisors and likened Shivaji's rule to "Ramraj," the golden era of the god-king Ram. Phule, on the other hand, completely dismissed Ramdas and other Brahmans, and instead likened Shivaji's rule to "Baliraj," referring to the mythological demon-king Bali who – according to the subaltern interpretation of the myth – was an ideal king unjustly sent to hell by a Brahman.[87]

Shahu Chhatrapati (1874-1922), the Maharaja of Kolhapur, carried Phule's narrative of Shivaji into the twentieth century. As a Maratha prince and a descendant of Shivaji, Shahu Maharaj's support was greatly sought after by nationalists for their ongoing annual Shivaji festivals. However, when Shahu Maharaj learned in 1900 that his priest was performing for him only the Vedic rites that Shudras were fit to receive, not the rites performed for Kshatriyas, he became an advocate of the non-Brahman cause. In 1917, Shahu Maharaj and some associates organized the Shri Shivaji Maratha Memorial Society in Pune. One of the goals of this non-Brahman society was to build a statue of Shivaji.[88] For this new generation of activists, an abstract sculpture would no longer do. Rather, they now wanted to sponsor their own figural statue of the equestrian Shivaji as a way of clearly reclaiming the hero as their own. In 1921 they were successful, for when the Prince of Wales visited Maharashtra, Shahu Maharaj convinced him to inaugurate a monument to Shivaji as well as a memorial to the Maratha soldiers lost in World War I by explaining that it was Shivaji who "instilled into [the Marathas] the soldierly qualities

[87] Rosalind O'Hanlon reports that Phule's ballad also received harsh reviews in the literary journal *Vividhadnyan Vistar* in July of 1869 and in the *Dnyanodaya* on August 16 and September 1 of 1869. See her *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology*, op. cit., 175-179.
[88] Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society*, op. cit., 124-136.

which were manifested in the great World War."[89] This demonstrates James Young's point that figural statues can indeed accommodate many meanings. He writes that although abstract sculpture would seem to do this more naturally, it is in fact

> almost always a figurative monument… that serves as point of departure for political performances. It is as if figurative sculpture like this were needed to engage viewers with likenesses of people, to evoke an empathic link between viewer and monument that might then be marshaled into particular meaning.[90]

From 1922 forward, these activists introduced "Chhatrapati melas" celebrating Shivaji into the annual Ganapati festival, singing songs that criticized Brahmans for their economic exploitation of non-Brahmans. One generation of non-Brahman activists after another crafted counter-narratives of Shivaji anew throughout the twentieth century. They continued to make public these counter-narratives – which dismissed Ramdas and other Brahmans – during the annual Shivaji festivals, in particular, by re-enacting their memories of Shivaji through posters, plays, songs, and other media.[91]

I have dwelt upon this sculptural discussion at some length in order to demonstrate the multivalence that a single narrative image – such as the equestrian Shivaji – can have. In postcolonial India, Shivaji has remained the most emblematic figure of the Maharashtrian public sphere in Brahman and non-Brahman circles alike. Indeed, Shivaji's name is so powerful that Richard Cashman has commented that no politician can afford to ignore it, and that each political party of the region throughout the twentieth century defined its program in terms of Shivaji: "Politicians and parties vied with each other in their attempts to gain Shivaji's endorsement for their particular

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[89] Cited in James Laine, *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*, op. cit., 79.

[90] James Young, "The Biography of a Memorial Icon," op. cit., 101.

[91] For instance, see the interview with playwright Tushar Bhadre in Shanta Gokhale, *Playwright at the Centre: Marathi Drama from 1843 to the Present* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000), 376-389. On the new nationalist literature produced by non-Brahman activists in the first half of the twentieth century, see Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society*, op. cit., 234-241.

programs. It is ironic that even the "anti-imperial" Communists can take pride in the empire of Shivaji."[92]

But as a regional Maratha identity solidified in post-independent India, and the movement for a state composed of the Marathi-speaking population grew, the regionalist image of Shivaji as the foremost of the nation's defenders – rather than as the defender of non-Brahmans – continued to dominate.[93] The Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti (SMS) spearheaded this movement, which eventually led to the formation of the state of Maharashtra in 1960. Throughout the 1950s, the SMS promoted an image of Maharashtra as the nation's protector, and argued through the vernacular press that as the descendants of the first real Indian nationalist, Shivaji, the Marathas deserved their own territory.

Once again Shivaji was the focus of the nation. As the issue surged, even Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who had previously denounced Shivaji as a "predatory adventurer," ultimately felt the need to incorporate him into the national memorial landscape. On January 16, 1956, after Nehru declared Bombay a Union Territory, a large protest erupted. In this six-day-long "Battle for Bombay," over eighty demonstrators were killed by police fire, becoming instant martyrs for the Maharashtrian cause. After the battle was over, Nehru made an effort to appease the Maratha people and to recognize

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[92] Richard Cashman, *Myth of the* Lokamanya, op. cit., 119.

[93] As O'Hanlon has explained, the term "Maratha" is a complex one. The peasant castes of Maharashtra are generally known as the Maratha-Kunbi cluster of castes. In many usages, neither "Maratha" nor "Kunbi" were caste-specific terms: "kunbi" is a generic term for all those who work on the land, while "Maratha" was used to denote all Marathi speakers, or all Marathi speakers who fought under the banner of Shivaji. For the British, the Marathas were not a caste, but a regional group, one of the "martial races" of India. However, the term "Maratha" increasingly came to be used in a more caste-specific way, to denote those families within the larger complex of peasant castes who claimed a genealogical link with the old Rajput kingly families claiming Kshatriya *varna* status; the ordinary kunbi peasant families, on the other hand, accepted the Shudra *varna*. See Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology*, op. cit., 15-21; also Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 34. For another interesting historical discussion of the term "Maratha," see Stewart Gordon, *Marathas, Marauders, and State Formation in Eighteenth-Century India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 182-208.

their unique identity by unveiling a new statue of Shivaji at Pratapgarh in 1957.[94] Notably, this statue was figural, featuring Shivaji astride his horse, wielding his sword. For many who visit this statue, the memory of Shivaji is now inextricably linked with this protest movement. For them, the statue valorizes the suffering of those who fought for Maharashtra in the seventeenth *and* twentieth centuries.

When the Shiv Sena was founded in Bombay in 1966 by political cartoonist Bal Thackeray, its slogan was "Maharashtra for Maharashtrians." Initially, the Shiv Sena appealed to the lower- and middle-class families who felt a measure of resentment towards the South Indian and Gujarati upper class in Bombay. In the 1970s, communists were targeted next, and projecting Muslims as the latest enemy of choice helped the Shiv Sena to redefine itself as a Hindu nationalist organization in the 1980s and become the majority party in Maharashtra in 1995. Despite this flexibility of the "other," the characterization of the "self" in the Shiv Sena's rhetoric has remained quite constant throughout the years: the "self" is a manly, Marathi-speaking Maharashtrian who is the martial guardian of the Hindu nation. "Shiv Sena" means "Shivaji's Army," and the men who join this "army" are likened to Shivaji's soldiers, willing to bravely sacrifice even their lives defending the Marathi community and the larger "Hindu nation." Using such popular media as figural statues, posters, pamphlets, festivals, and other public commemorations, they define Shivaji as the first true nationalist hero, a Kshatriya protector of cows and Brahmans, and a sanctified figure beyond reproach.[95]

Non-Brahman activists throughout Maharashtra continue to resist this now-dominant characterization of Shivaji and to interpret this icon in their own way. Most recently, the members of the non-Brahman group Maratha Seva Sangh, which advocates

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[94] For further information on the SMS and the Battle for Bombay, see Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence*, ibid., 41-45.

[95] For instance, see the pamphlet *Shiv Sena Speaks* (Bombay, 1967).

the new Shiv Dharma religion, have based their doctrine on Phule's interpretation of Shivaji. These members have begun to propagate their religion and make public their claim on Shivaji through a variety of visual media: they have produced posters of Shivaji (using both equestrian and portrait-style imagery) and distributed them at Shiv Jayanti festivals; sponsored plaques with their organization's name inscribed upon them at Raigarh, Sindhudurg, and others among Shivaji's forts; and donated figural statues of Shivaji to various locales, including the bust of Shivaji that now stands in the Chhabutar at Raigarh Fort.

When the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book issue on Shivaji was first conceived of in 1970, the Shiv Sena was rising as a prominent political force. In an effort to take advantage of this resurgent interest in Shivaji, the *Shivaji* comic book was released in 1971. Yet the producers wanted their comic book to appeal to a large audience of Brahmans and non-Brahmans alike, and therefore decided to overlook the issue of Shivaji's relationship with Saint Ramdas. Anant Pai stated that from the very beginning, he has sought to promote national integration by creating comics that featured mythological and historical figures – including Shivaji – that everyone could enjoy, no matter their caste, regional, or religious identity.[96] He continued by explaining that ever since he was taken to court by the Valmiki Sabha, a Dalit (scheduled caste) group, for depicting Valmiki, author of a version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic who they revere as god, as a dark-skinned dacoit in the *Valmiki* issue (no. 46, 1973), he has taken the extra step of having comics on sensitive subjects approved by various organizations, such as the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandhak Committee in Amritsar for the Sikh comic books:

> You see, in 1976 I was presented with a lawsuit by the Valmiki Sabha in the Punjab for defaming their community in the *Valmiki ACK*. They objected to the presentation of Valmiki as a dacoit. The lawsuit was filed under Section 295,

[96] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Bombay, March 6, 2002.

> which forbids the disparaging of a religious community – I can't remember the technical language, but that is what it does. Anyway, it was a big commotion when I went to the Punjab to defend myself in court – they even burned effigies of me in the Punjab, and there was a lot of press coverage, some negative and some positive. But the CM [Chief Minister] of the Punjab, a Sikh, he eventually dismissed the case. Before then, I was careful. But since then, I get the approval of religious communities whenever I print an issue about a religious figure – that way I don't offend anyone.[97]

Like Shivaji, Valmiki is a sanctified historical Indian figure that is differently interpreted by Brahmans and non-Brahmans. Unwittingly, Anant Pai – a Brahman – excluded the non-Brahmanic understanding of Valmiki when he decided to base the comic's script on popular traditions, including the tradition that Valmiki was a robber before he was enlightened and composed the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[98] Anant Pai stresses that his comic books are for Brahmans and non-Brahmans alike, and claims that although he was very careful when making *Shivaji*, he learned his lesson from the *Valmiki* issue and now maintains that same level of care with all of his other comic titles.

Significantly, however, the subject of Shivaji's relationship with Ramdas has come up in other issues in this comic book series. For instance, the *Chhatrasal* issue (no. 41, 1973), which tells the story of Chhatrasal's fight against the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, features a discussion between Chhatrasal and Shivaji about Ramdas. Chhatrasal approaches Shivaji for advice in fighting the Mughals. Shivaji tells Chhatrasal that although the Mughal army is large, it cannot withstand surprise attacks. At this point, Chhatrasal asks Shivaji about a framed picture that is shown hanging on the wall. In the next panel – a close-up of the framed picture of a guru – Shivaji tells

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[97] Anant Pai, ibid. Note: Section 295(A) of the Indian Penal Code prohibits deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class, by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.

[98] For a further discussion of the Valmiki Sabha's protest of the *Valmiki* comic book, see Julia Leslie, *Authority and Meaning in Indian Religions: Hinduism and the Case of Valmiki* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 12-17. Leslie writes that "the popularity of this comic-book series surely bears some responsibility for the spread of the legend and thus for the continued attribution of a wicked past to the divinized poet-saint, Valmiki" (page 13).

Chhatrasal, "He is my patron saint and guru, Swami Ramdas. I draw my strength and inspiration from him."[99] Chhatrasal takes Shivaji's words to heart, and shortly after their meeting finds his own guru, Pran Nath, and thereafter attains victory in his martial quest.

The cover of the *Samarth Ramdas* issue (no. 222, 1980) paints an even clearer picture of Saint Ramdas as Shivaji's spiritual advisor **[Fig. 4.10]**. In this image, Shivaji kneels in prostration before Saint Ramdas. In the background Shivaji's troops wait patiently while Ramdas blesses their leader; and in the foreground a *murti* of the increasingly popular and increasingly martial deity Hanuman oversees the meeting between Shivaji and Ramdas, lending his blessing to Shivaji's mission as well.[100] Posters of Shivaji kneeling before the Brahman Saint Ramdas have been sold in Maharashtra throughout the twentieth century, and reflect the now-dominant understanding of Shivaji as a Hindu leader guided by his Brahman advisor that has been promoted since Tilak's time. But throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, non-Brahmans have countered such imagery with posters of their own, depicting Shivaji kneeling before the non-Brahman Saint Tukaram.[101] Thus although the *Shivaji* issue can perhaps be read and embraced by Brahmans and non-Brahmans alike, other issues do not allow for multiple interpretations of Shivaji, but instead reflect the Brahmanical orientation of Anant Pai and the majority of the other producers of this comic book series.

HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY: THE CORONATION OF SHIVAJI

How wide a gulf is there between history and mythology, "fact" and "fiction"? In his discussion of the three basic kinds of historical representation – annals, the chronicle,

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[99] *Chhatrasal*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 41 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1973), 17.

[100] On Hanuman's evolving role in popular Hinduism, see Philip Lutgendorf, "Monkey in the Middle: the Status of Hanuman in Popular Hinduism," *Religion*, no. 27 (1997), 311-332; and his "My Hanuman is Bigger than Yours," *History of Religions*, vol. 33.3 (February 1994), 211-245.

[101] Shivaji is not depicted on the cover of the *Tukaram* comic book (no. 68, 1974), and although the popular legend of his meeting with Tukaram is briefly recounted on page 30 within the comic book, he is not presented as a disciple of Tukaram.

and the "history proper" – historian Hayden White reveals that the very distinction between real and imaginary events, basic to modern discussions of history and fiction, presupposes a notion of reality in which "the true" is identified with "the real" only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity; that is, only insofar as events are ordered so as to allow them to be assessed for their significance as elements of a moral drama.[102] Thus, in Sudipta Kaviraj's terms, history, instead of being distinguished by the "trueness of the story," is now distinguished by the "storyness of its truth." What distinguishes history is a form, a way of ordering events; but those events can be either true or imaginary.[103] In a similar move, historians of religion have begun to think about the narrative strategies of myths. Bruce Lincoln, for instance, defines mythology as "ideology in narrative form," arguing that "[u]ltimately, what come to be accepted as standard, proper, or hegemonic versions of myths are collective products that have been negotiated between narrators and audiences over time."[104]

There is no easy division between history and mythology: not just in India, but throughout the world mythological stories are often understood as literal truth, while historical figures are easily mythologized. Her take on Shivaji's character aside, Nancy Adajania was certainly correct in her assertion in *The Illustrated Weekly* that the *Amar Chitra Katha* narrative of Shivaji is not "real history," that Shivaji is presented as a "superhuman symbol" rather than as a historical individual.[105] More even than film, television, or any other new media, it is the nature of the comic book medium to transform protagonists into heroes; and the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, in particular, was

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[102] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 1-23.
[103] Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness,* op. cit., 107-157.
[104] Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 150. See also Robert Ellwood, "Is Mythology Obsolete?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Vol. 69, No. 3, Sept. 2001), 673-686.
[105] Nancy Adajania, "Myth and Supermyth," op. cit., 34.

created to tell "immortal picture stories." But what are the implications of depicting historical figures as icons, as heroes?

In the full-page final panel of the *Shivaji* comic book featuring Shivaji's coronation ceremony [refer to Fig. 4.6], no mention is made of the great lengths to which Shivaji had to go to prove his Kshatriya lineage in order to silence those who questioned the legitimacy of his rule. Instead, there is a deliberate erasure here of the fact that Shivaji did not just assume the throne after defeating all of his enemies, that he still had to convince many Brahmans that he was indeed worthy of such a position. There is also an active attempt to forget the remainder of Shivaji's life after his coronation in 1674, including his death in 1680. The final six years of his life are by no means as heroic as the earlier years: Shivaji was unable to convince his half-brother, Shahji's heir in the south, to join his cause; his own son, Sambhaji, defected to the Mughals, thereby leaving him without a worthy heir of his own; and ultimately, Shivaji died from an illness in 1680. But social memory – not to mention the comic book formula – demands that martial heroes have heroic deaths, that they die sacrificially on the battlefield. I suggest that these final six years of Shivaji's life are not remembered, that they are instead actively forgotten, because they do not cast Shivaji in the proper heroic light.[106]

In discussing the historical fiction novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj raises the issue of narrative closure, writing:

> By narrativity, the simple act of telling and not telling, the narrator can gerrymander events – not by directly falsifying them, but by the most unanswerable of his narrative weapons, his right of closure. In history, Rajsinha's victory against Mughal power must have been the merest of reprieves. But in the narrative, Rajsinha's victory stands out indelibly. This difference is simply because history does not have an end, but the narrative has.[107]

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[106] But for an interesting discussion of how the traditional Hindu king requires a heroic death, and a story of how Shivaji was tempted to commit ritual suicide as a way of self-sacrificial salvation, see James Laine with S.S. Bahulkar, *The Epic of Shivaji*, op. cit., 25-32.

[107] Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness,* op. cit., 153.

In history, Shivaji lived until 1680, when he died from an illness and without an heir. But in the comic book, Shivaji's ultimate victory – the founding of a Maratha kingdom – stands out indelibly due to this strategy of narrative closure. Bankimchandra and other authors of historical fiction in the late-nineteenth century often felt that their duty was to convey the general truth about a period of history, supplementing the historical record with their imagination when necessary, in order to arrive at a "true history," one which related the memory of the glorious deeds of past heroes in a way that was relevant in the present.[108] Like these authors, the creators of the *Shivaji* comic have also combined realism and idealism, narrative and icon, history and mythology in order to arrive at their "true history" of Shivaji. In the full-page final panel of the newly crowned king seated upon his throne, Shivaji's death is not visually depicted, and is only hinted at in the text: "As a king he ruled only for five years; but the Maratha power which he had built, flourished for many years after him." Shown seated before a court full of loyal and cheering subjects, who declare that Shivaji's "name will shine and inspire millions," both text and image are united here in preserving the memory of Shivaji's ultimate victory.[109]

Other historical comic books within the *Amar Chitra Katha* series featuring martial figures end with a heroic death scene, typically on the battlefield, as in *Tanaji* (no. 40, 1973), *Rani Durgavati* (no. 104, 1976), or the *Prithviraj Chauhan* issue (no. 25, 1971). But this final panel in the *Shivaji* comic book is more similar, both textually and visually, to the final panel of the comic books about the mythological god-king Ram. In the *Rama* comic book (no. 15, 1970), for instance, the final image is his coronation ceremony, while the text informs us that the god-king Ram was "crowned king in

[108] Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness,* ibid.; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, op. cit., 76-94.
[109] *Shivaji*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 23, op. cit., 32.

Ayodhya and he ruled for many years" [refer to Fig. 4.7].[110] Thus here too Shivaji's rule is subtly likened to "Ramraj," rather than "Baliraj." And when the *Valmiki's Ramayana* bumper issue (no. 10,001) was released in 1992, it also ended with a remarkably similar full-page panel of the coronation **[Fig. 4.11]**.

Like other images of Shivaji's coronation, including the large figural statue of Shivaji seated on his throne that now stands at the Raigarh memorial site, this comic book image of Shivaji's coronation could conceivably be interpreted in various ways. For some, Shivaji's coronation could signify the victory of Indian independence; for others, it could signify Hindu solidarity in the face of a Muslim onslaught; and for still others it could signify the victory of a low-caste hero over elite, Brahmanical culture.[111] Yet despite the potential multivalence of this final image, the comic book narrative as a whole encourages readers to remember Shivaji as a victorious Hindu king. As we have seen, both visually and textually the comic book producers had many narrative options to choose from. Ultimately, they chose to side with the dominant Brahmanical, Hindu nationalist interpretation of Shivaji by eliding references to Shivaji's caste struggles and likening Shivaji's rule to Ramraj, and by portraying his struggle with Afzal Khan as a communal one.

During my conversations with former associate editor Subba Rao, he mentioned that when the *Shivaji* issue was written, the "gray episodes" of Shivaji's life were intentionally left out, in order to better portray him as a hero. After its publication, some

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[110] *Rama, Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 15, op. cit., 32.

[111] On the significance of Shivaji's coronation, see the volumes that were published in 1974-5 in celebration of the third centennial anniversary of the coronation: B.K. Apte, ed., *Chhatrapati Shivaji: Coronation Tercentenary Commemoration Volume* (Bombay: University of Bombay, 1974-5); and Narayan H. Kulkarnee, ed., *Chhatrapati Shivaji: Architect of Freedom* (Delhi: Chhatrapati Shivaji Smarak Samiti, 1975).

people – including Nancy Adajania – questioned whether it was appropriate to mythologize a historical figure in this manner. He continued:

> There was much criticism about this, and also about how the Muslims were portrayed in it. But still the comic book is a bestseller; it has not been cancelled, it has instead been reprinted and you can find it for sale everywhere, not just in Maharashtra, but all over India.[112]

Indeed, reprints of the *Shivaji* issue are widely available throughout India, complete with a superior "deluxe edition" laminated cover. For Mr. Rao, the popularity of this issue is consolation that the creators made the right decision in deciding to incorporate historical figures into this comic book series. I would argue, however, that the popularity of this issue has more to do with the culture wars that have dominated South Asian politics in recent decades. Since the late 1960s, as the communal interpretation of Indian history has become deeply rooted in modern social memory, politicians in Maharashtra and, increasingly, throughout the nation have drawn upon the hegemonic Shivaji narrative – and especially Shivaji's battle with Afzal Khan – in order to motivate and unify Hindu voters.[113] And the producers of popular media, including comic books, have responded to and benefited from this interest in Shivaji. Since its initial press run in 1971, the *Shivaji* comic book has continually been reprinted and sold throughout India to meet the growing demand for the issue, while several other *Amar Chitra Katha* issues have faced declining sales. In Bombay in particular, the demand for images of Shivaji slaying Afzal Khan increased dramatically in the 1990s, fuelling sales of the *Shivaji* comic book as well

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[112] Subba Rao, interviewed by the author in Bombay, March 5, 2002.

[113] In addition to state-sponsored statuary, the "Chhatrapati Shri Shivaji Maharaj" 30-rupee postal stamp that was released by the Government of India in 1980, which shows Shivaji descending the stairs of the Pratapgarh fort en route to his encounter with Afzal Khan, is one example of the increased attention given to and usage of the Shivaji narrative by nationalist politicians. So also is the renaming of streets and public buildings after Shivaji in Bombay and beyond, as discussed by Thomas Blom Hansen in his *Wages of Violence*, op. cit.

as posters, calendars, and other items.[114] Yet this Shivaji, the Shivaji who is remembered as a manly defender of Maharashtra and the larger Hindu nation, as the protector of cows and Brahmans, and as the hero who "fought for all of India," in Anant Pai's words, is not a hero to all Indians.

[114] For a discussion of a new poster of Shivaji slaying Afzal Khan that was created by the artist Rajan Musle and published by S.S. Brijbasi in Bombay in 1994, see Christopher Pinney, "The Nation (Un)Pictured?" op. cit., 863-866. He notes that this popular image is unsigned because both the artist and the publisher are aware that it is likely to "trigger some communal feelings." The same artist also created an image of muscular Ram in 1994, after the destruction of the Babri Masjid.

Chapter 5: 'Allah Ho Akbar': Secularism, Conversion, and the Representation of Muslims in *Amar Chitra Katha*

Anant Pai, the founder and still-current editor of *Amar Chitra Katha*, recently wrote about the "secular" nature of this comic book series in an article published in *Gentleman* magazine. Here he explained that the wide array of titles available in the series is meant to appeal to all Indians, regardless of their religious identities:

> To mythology, we added history, folktales, regional heroes, heroines. Feedback from readers, and from educationists and savants at seminars helped a lot. When a group in Goa charged me of Hindu propaganda, I countered it by saying that epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were the heritage of all Indians. [And] I was quick to add titles like *Babur*, *Humayun*, a title on Jesus Christ, and tried to make the series more secular.[1]

The first comic book to feature a Muslim figure as its protagonist – *Babur* (no. 134) – was published in 1977, ten years after the comic book series was founded, in order to appease critics who alleged that the series had a Hindu bias. Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in India (r. 1526-30), is clearly conceived of as a hero in the comic book, for the introduction to the *Babur* issue tells us that "Babur was not just a good soldier or an able general; he was also a wise and just ruler, with qualities of generosity and good humour."[2] Issues on the rest of the "Great Mughals" followed shortly thereafter, though not in strict chronological order: *Humayun* (no. 140, 1977); *Noor Jahan* (no. 148, 1977); *Akbar* (no. 200, 1979); *Shah Jahan* (no. 204, 1979); *Jahangir* (no. 221, 1980); and *Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb* (no. 232, 1981). But has the addition of these titles actually contributed to Anant Pai's oft-stated goal of promoting national integration? Do they work to make the comic book series more "secular," as Anant Pai claims?

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[1] Anant Pai, "Mythology in Pictures," *Gentleman* (February 2000), 39.

[2] *Babur*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 134 (Bombay: India Book House, 1977), inside front cover.

Not all "readers, educationists, and savants" have been appeased by the addition of these issues on the Great Mughals to the *Amar Chitra Katha* corpus. Scholar Frances Pritchett, for example, has lamented that although the Mughal emperors are portrayed "on the whole rather favorably," virtually no other Muslim figures are featured in this popular medium:

> On the 'Makers of Modern India' list there are no Muslims to speak of either – no Dr. Zakir Husain, no Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, no Hakim Ajmal Khan, no Asif Ali, no Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, no Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. There is only *Thanedar Hasan Askari* (286), an issue devoted to an idiosyncratic, apolitical police inspector in Uttar Pradesh in the 1930s. … Apart from his name, there is nothing Muslim about him.[3]

Others have taken this criticism further, alleging that the pro-Hindu bias of the comic book series is political in nature. Indian journalist Sanjay Joshi, for instance, has written that the *Amar Chitra Katha* series is

> history with a strong 'great man' bent and a decided Hindu chauvinist bias. Most stories are full of 'patriotic' (Hindu) kings defending the 'motherland' against 'foreign' (Muslim) rulers. In all battles soldiers are shown shouting "Allah O Akbar" or "Har Har Mahadev," as if religion were all that the battles were fought about. The 'two nation thesis' is drummed into impressionable minds from this young age.[4]

Similarly, Anita Mannur, a scholar who read these comics as a child growing up in the diaspora, writes:

> As I look back at the series, it has become apparent that the body of 'knowledge' it presents about India is Hindu-centric. While I acquired tidbits of knowledge about each of the Mughal emperors, a few Sufi mystics, and some Sikh gurus, I learned a lot more about Hindu deities, devotees, saints, mythology, and historical characters (e.g., Birbal, a minister in Akbar's court).[5]

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[3] Frances W. Pritchett, "The World of *Amar Chitra Katha*," in L. Babb and S. Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 95-96.

[4] Sanjay Joshi, "ACKs: Distorted History or Education?" *The Telegraph* (Sunday November 13, 1983), 8.

[5] Anita Mannur, " 'The Glorious Heritage of India': Notes on the Politics of Amar Chitra Katha," *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* (vol. 38, no. 4, 2000), 32. Also see the related articles on "The Controversial Amar Chitra Katha Comic Books" by Sandhya Rao and Sanjay Sircar in this issue, pp. 32-36.

She therefore urges other diasporic Indians to reevaluate these beloved comics, arguing that "given the rise of Hindu fundamentalist politics in the subcontinent and beyond, it is perhaps time to look beyond the words and pictures that make ACK so endearing to so many."[6]

In this chapter, I will take a closer look at the representation of Muslims in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series. While I find it to be fairly self-evident that the majority of the titles printed in this series are Hindu-oriented,[7] and do not dispute the criticisms raised by Frances Pritchett, Sanjay Joshi, and Anita Mannur, it is not my goal to simply add another charge of "Hindu chauvinist bias" to this list. Instead, I ask what the term "secular" means in the context of these comic books in particular, and in modern India more generally, in order to shed light upon some of the deeper cultural and sociopolitical roots of the depiction of Muslim figures in this comic book series.

SHAH JAHAN AND THE 'WORLD'S GREATEST MONUMENT TO TRUE LOVE'

The *Shah Jahan* (no. 204, 1979) and *Akbar* (no. 200, 1979) comic books are the two best-selling issues featuring Muslim protagonists.[8] Unlike most of the other comic books on the Great Mughals, these two issues have been reprinted numerous times and are still widely available today. In fact, I have encountered the *Shah Jahan* issue being hawked to foreign and domestic tourists alike outside the Taj Mahal, the famous mausoleum that was built by Shah Jahan (r. 1627-58) in the seventeenth century. "See the love story," said one hawker to me on my first visit to the Taj in 1999, pointing at the cover of the comic book and winking at me **[Fig. 5.1]**. As the hawker's statement suggests, much of the appeal of this comic book is its romantic characterization of Shah

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[6] Anita Mannur, " 'The Glorious Heritage of India'," ibid., 33.
[7] See the Appendix for a list of all of the titles published in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series.
[8] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, February 18, 2002.

Jahan, one that dates from the colonial period and is by no means unique to the comic book.

The *Shah Jahan* issue begins with the birth of Prince Khurram – who would later be called Shah Jahan ("King of the World") – in 1592. The court astrologer tells Khurram's grandfather, the Emperor Akbar, that his grandson will earn both fame and fortune in his lifetime. The comic then proceeds to tell us how the prince was schooled in mental and physical arts, and excelled at everything he attempted, pleasing his grandfather greatly: he is a brave hunter, an able swordsman, and a good scholar. At the age of twenty he is married to Arjumand Banu – who would later be known as Mumtaz Mahal ("Beloved of the Palace") – after a five-year engagement. From this point forward, the focus of the remaining twenty pages of the comic book is on the romantic sentiments of love and separation that the couple experiences over the years.

Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal must endure many lengthy separations from one another during various military campaigns. The comic book highlights these separations and the ensuing happy reunions: Shah Jahan defeats Rana Amar Singh in Mewar and then rushes home to his waiting wife and newborn daughter; Shah Jahan engages the Deccani rulers in battle and then quickly returns to celebrate his victory with his wife; Shah Jahan holds a council of war in Burhanpur and then returns for his wife's political advice. Indeed, Shah Jahan's victories on the battlefield seem to be due more to his desire to hurry up and finish fighting so that he can return home to his wife, than to any particular military skill. Although Shah Jahan's creative strategies in battle and his compassion in dealing with his enemies are mentioned, the overarching theme of this comic book is the great love that exists between Shah Jahan and his wife, who is portrayed as his soul-mate and his most loyal political advisor. When Shah Jahan is eventually estranged from his father, the Emperor Jahangir, the narrative again shifts to focus on the romantic couple.

Shah Jahan's wife and children bravely decide to accompany him as he flees the imperial forces. Mumtaz Mahal justifies this decision to her husband, saying, "As long as we are together, nothing matters."[9] Like true romantics, Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal would risk everything to forego any further periods of separation from one another.

Not long after Shah Jahan is finally crowned emperor, however, the romance takes a tragic turn as Mumtaz Mahal gives birth to her fourteenth child **[Fig. 5.2]**. On the second-to-last page of the comic book, Mumtaz Mahal lies dying, and asks Shah Jahan for a final request: that he build her a tomb "such as the world has never before seen."[10] Shah Jahan promises to do so. The comic book then ends with a full-page panel of Shah Jahan looking out the window at the Taj Mahal, the exquisite mausoleum that he built for his beloved wife **[Fig. 5.3]**. In this panel he is a lonely, decrepit man, shown lying in bed, with gray hair and white mourning attire. Here Shah Jahan lies dying, taking his last glimpse of the Taj Mahal. Described as "the world's greatest monument to true love,"[11] the Taj Mahal is here made the supreme symbol of the bond of love between man and woman.

By framing Shah Jahan's story with this scene – which is featured as both the cover image and the final panel – Shah Jahan is immortalized in this comic book as a great lover. His martial prowess, his extensive architectural programs, and his generous patronage of the arts are all overshadowed by the story of his undying love for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal. It is interesting that nowhere does the comic book mention Shah Jahan's other wives, an oversight that serves to heighten the romantic sentiment and that is common in most modern retellings of the romance between Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. Pratapaditya Pal has commented on the irony of this, noting that "the lady whose

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[9] *Shah Jahan*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 204 (Bombay: India Book House, 1979), 24.
[10] *Shah Jahan*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 204, ibid., 30.
[11] *Shah Jahan*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 204, ibid., 31.

memory has been so spectacularly enshrined" was not Shah Jahan's only wife, and yet "the Taj has become the symbol *par excellence* of one man's love for a woman."[12]

How did a tomb ever come to have such a romantic connotation? Under what circumstances was this one-dimensional, romantic image of the Taj – and of its creator, Shah Jahan – constructed? Certainly, the Taj Mahal could have other meanings, in addition to being a monument to true love: it could also be understood as a symbolic image of the Islamic concept of paradise, or as a visual representation of the Throne of God on Judgment Day.[13] Significantly, however, as Pratapaditya Pal and other scholars have cogently argued, the trope of the "romance of the Taj Mahal" – which can be found throughout the popular culture of India today, and even the world over – is "essentially a creation of Western enthusiasm."[14] During the seventeenth century, Western travelers to India wrote about their dealings with the Mughal rulers, sparking the curiosity of their readers back home. Two such travelers to India during Shah Jahan's lifetime were Jean-Baptiste Tavernier and Francois Bernier, both from France. Tavernier, a jeweler, visited Agra in 1641, and wrote about the "most splendid" tomb then being constructed by Shah Jahan.[15] Bernier, a physician, stayed in India for over a decade, from 1656-68. In his memoir, he wrote about the Taj Mahal, which had been completed by the time of his arrival, stating that Shah Jahan had erected it in memory of his wife, "that extraordinary

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[12] Pratapaditya Pal, "Introduction," in P. Pal et al., *The Romance of the Taj Mahal* (London: Thames and Hudson; Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1989), 9.

[13] On the former meaning, see Janice Leoshko, "Mausoleum for an Empress," in P. Pal et al., *The Romance of the Taj Mahal* (London: Thames and Hudson; Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1989), 53-87; on the latter meaning, see Wayne Begley, "The Myth of the Taj Mahal and a New Theory of Its Symbolic Meaning," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 61 (1979), 7-37.

[14] Pratapaditya Pal, "Romance of the Taj Mahal," in P. Pal et al., *The Romance of the Taj Mahal* (London: Thames and Hudson; Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1989), 194. See also his "Introduction," op. cit., for a discussion of the use of the Taj Mahal in Indian and Western advertising. The romantic image of the mausoleum lives on in recent Bollywood films as well. See, for instance, "Taj Mahal: A Monument of Love" (directed by Robin Khosla, 2003) and "Taj Mahal: An Eternal Love Story" (directed by Akbar Khan, 2003).

[15] J.B. Tavernier, *Travels in India by Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Baron of Aubonne*, vol. 1, trans. by V. Ball (second edition, ed. By William Crooke, London: Oxford University Press, 1925), 90-91.

and celebrated beauty, of whom her husband was so enamoured that it is said he was constant to her during life, and at her death was so affected as nearly to follow her to the grave."[16] Aside from Shah Jahan's undying love for his wife, however, what most intrigued Bernier was the so-called "war of succession" that Shah Jahan's four sons waged for the imperial throne during his lifetime. Bernier wrote about this struggle in his *Histoire de la Derniere Revolution des etats du Grand Mogul*, published in 1670. This book was translated into English the very next year, and served as the inspiration for John Dryden's popular play *Aurang-Zebe* (1675), which was repeatedly reprinted and staged even into the nineteenth century. The beginning of the play, which is taken directly from Bernier's *History*, sets the stage for this war of succession as it was then recounted:

> I found also at my arrival that this king of the world, Shah Jahan, of above seventy years of age, had four sons and two daughters; that some years since he had made these four sons vice-kings or governors of four of his most considerable provinces or kingdoms; that it was almost a year that he was fallen into a great sickness, whence it was believed he would never recover: which had occasioned a great division among these four brothers (all laying claim to the empire), and had kindled among them a war which lasted five years…[17]

These two aspects of Shah Jahan's life – his undying love for his wife, as embodied in the mausoleum he built for her, and the war of succession waged by his own sons during his lifetime – became the focus of his legend throughout the colonial period, inspiring further texts as well as images, and eventually reducing the emperor to a romantic and tragic figure. Whereas the Mughals themselves were initially the primary focus of authors and artists, the Taj Mahal gradually received more attention as the British consolidated their power in India from the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. This is both because India became more accessible to

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[16] F. Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire A.D. 1656-1668*, trans. by A. Constable (New Delhi: S. Chand and Co., 1968 [1891]), 293. Cited by Pratapaditya Pal, "Romance of the Taj Mahal," op. cit., 194.
[17] Frederick M. Link, "Introduction" to *Aureng-Zebe* by John Dryden (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), xv.

Western travelers – who began to think of the Taj as one of India's greatest attractions – after the British Raj was on the ascendant, as Pratapaditya Pal points out, and because the surveys and repairs of the Taj that were undertaken by the British from the early nineteenth century also commanded greater attention for the monument, as Janice Leoshko points out.[18]

This way of thinking about the Taj and about Shah Jahan as a romantic and tragic figure – which thereby minimized his political power – continued to develop as the British were establishing themselves as the new seat of power in the region.[19] An essay by Sir William Wilson Hunter titled "The Ruin of Aurangzeb; Or the History of a Reaction," which was first published in 1887, illustrates this point. In this essay Hunter describes Shah Jahan as an ill and aged figure as a prelude to his discussion of the war of succession:

> [T]he Emperor, now sixty-seven years of age, lay stricken with a terrible disease. The poor old palace-builder well knew the two essential conditions for retaining the Mughal throne – namely, to be perfectly pitiless to his kindred and to be in perfect health himself.[20]

Hunter then gives a lengthy and rather favorable account of Aurangzeb's role in the war of succession, arguing that Aurangzeb did not initially aspire to throne, but was instead "forced by his eldest brother's intrigues to assume the defensive."[21] However, Hunter's

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[18] Pratapaditya Pal, "Romance of the Taj Mahal," op. cit., 199; Janice Leoshko, "Mausoleum for an Empress," op. cit., 53 and 86.

[19] This observation about the Taj Mahal has been made by Janice Leoshko, who writes about the nineteenth-century British understanding of the Taj Mahal that "the romantic qualities supposedly revealed by this sublime structure were at that time preferable to the aspects of the Taj Mahal that demonstrated the might of [the] Mughal dynasty." Janice Leoshko, review of *The Moonlight Garden: New Discoveries at the Taj Mahal* by Elizabeth B. Moynihan, *Persimmon* (Winter 2002), 95.

[20] Sir William Wilson Hunter, "The Ruin of Aurangzeb; Or the History of a Reaction," in *The India of the Queen and Other Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), 83. This essay was first published in the May 1887 issue of *Nineteenth Century*.

[21] Sir William Wilson Hunter, "The Ruin of Aurangzeb," ibid., 83-84. This is similar to the positive portrayal of Aurangzeb and the rather negative portrayal of his eldest brother, Dara Shukoh, found in both Bernier's *History* and Dryden's *Aurang-Zebe*.

favorable description of Aurangzeb ends there. He next states that after the war of succession,

> [h]aving thus disposed of his three brothers, Aurangzeb got rid of their sons by slow poisoning with laudanum, and shut up his aged father in his palace till he died. Then was let loose on India that tremendously destructive force, a puritan Muhammadan monarch. In 1658… Aurangzeb, at the age of forty, seated himself on the throne of the Mughals. The narrative of his long reign of half a century is the history of a great reaction against the religious compromises of his predecessors, and against their policy of conciliation towards the native races.[22]

According to Hunter, a "bitter war of religion" between the native Hindus and the ruling Muslims was the result of Aurangzeb's reign, and it was this war of religion that was the cause of the downfall of the Mughal Empire.[23] Hunter sees this downfall as an object lesson for the British, and concludes his essay with the following sentence: "It was by the alienation of the native races that the Mughal Empire perished; it is by the incorporation of those races into a loyal and a united people that the British rule will endure."[24]

Earlier writings about Mughal dynastic figures, such as Dryden's play *Aurang-Zebe*, focused upon the war of succession and thus portrayed Shah Jahan as the aged king whose advanced years and illness provided the occasion for the war. Hunter's essay and others like it by nineteenth-century colonial figures went further, seeking to differentiate between the current and the previous regimes, and thereby to demonstrate the lasting vitality of the current colonial regime. In such works Shah Jahan was remembered as the "poor old palace builder" who had been locked up in the Agra Fort by his own son, and characterized as an impotent, pathetic old man whose greatest achievement was his monument to love, the Taj Mahal. And whereas Dryden had depicted Aurangzeb as the

[22] Sir William Wilson Hunter, "The Ruin of Aurangzeb," ibid., 85.
[23] Sir William Wilson Hunter, "The Ruin of Aurangzeb," ibid., 88.
[24] Sir William Wilson Hunter, "The Ruin of Aurangzeb," ibid., 96.

ideal prince,[25] Hunter portrayed him as a "puritan Muhammadan monarch" whose intolerant policies divided the country and crashed the empire.

The first and last images of Shah Jahan in the *Shah Jahan* comic book are part of this colonial legacy, for they call to mind not only the tragic loss of Shah Jahan's wife, but also his ultimate dethronement by his son Aurangzeb. The text of the comic book nowhere mentions that Aurangzeb had imprisoned his father in the Agra Fort – another interesting oversight that was perhaps intentionally committed so as to gloss over the unpleasantness of the war of succession. However, the viewer that is already familiar with this part of Shah Jahan's legend will immediately discern that Shah Jahan is here shown in the Jasmine Tower of the Agra Fort, where he spent the final years of his life under lock and key, a prisoner of his son, Aurangzeb. The loss that Shah Jahan mourns here is not just that of his beloved wife, then, but of his own former might and vitality as emperor as well. Here too the exalted and powerful Shah Jahan – the "King of the World" who created the Taj and also the new capital city Shahjahanabad as an expression of his political might and majesty – is reduced to a decrepit, pathetic old man, dreaming of former days of glory while he lies dying.

When I spoke with Souren Roy, the artist who illustrated the *Shah Jahan* comic book, I mentioned the similarity between the final panel, which he created, and the cover of the comic book, which was done by another artist, the late P.G. Sircar. In response to my questions about the cover design, Souren Roy stated that the covers are always done in-house in the Bombay studio, and explained further: "They take the cover from one of the panels inside. It works like this: they look at the whole issue, at all of the panels that I

[25] On Dryden's depiction of Aurangzeb as the ideal prince, see Frederick M. Link, "Introduction" to *Aureng-Zebe* by John Dryden, op. cit., xiii-xxiii; also Michael Alssid, "The Design of Dryden's *Aureng-Zebe*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. LXIV (1965), 452-469.

have created. Then they pick one panel and design the cover based on it."[26] When I asked him how they decided which panel, Mr. Roy described the process as follows:

> Well, it should feature the hero of the comic book, and it should show him in a way that reveals something about him and about the story. For example, if the story is about a historical king who won an important battle, then the cover should show that king, should depict something about that battle, and should depict the king's bravery in battle.[27]

Although Shah Jahan did experience several important military victories, the cover of the *Shah Jahan* issue did not depict him in battle. Rather, the panel that was chosen for the cover image as the one that most reveals something about Shah Jahan and about his story is the final image of the comic book, in which the old man lies in his prison-bed staring at the Taj Mahal. It is the romantic sentiment, rather than the heroic, therefore, that should be stirred up in the reader when he or she first looks at this comic book.

As I continued my discussion with Souren Roy, I commented on the depiction of Shah Jahan imprisoned within the Agra Fort, and asked him what sort of visual references he used while working on the *Shah Jahan* issue. Mr. Roy replied that he had visited the Taj Mahal and the Agra Fort, and "took many snapshots" while he was there. "You need very good art training in perspective," he continued,

> otherwise you don't know what snapshots to take, what angles to look from. And for the Mughals there are lots of portraits, lots of miniature books, lots of paintings from that time and later. Some drawings I collected in the miniature style – they are mainly profiles. The artist must have references. He must collect as many as possible in order to be accurate, correct. So I looked at the profiles, and then from the profile image I would imagine the full face of Shah Jahan, Akbar, others. You know, live models are difficult to get. And anyway, [laughing] how can you get a live model of Aurangzeb? The references are also important for style of dress and other details. And I look at photos of the landscape, the buildings – like the Agra Fort. Sometimes Mr. Pai sends us

[26] Souren Roy, interviewed by the author in Calcutta, February 05, 2002.
[27] Souren Roy, ibid.

> xeroxes, sometimes I go myself and take snapshots. With lots of authentic references you get confidence in what you are doing, in doing it the right way.[28]

Surely the paintings of Shah Jahan that were done by the artists of the Bengal School of Art in the early twentieth century were among the many "paintings from that time and later" that Souren Roy examined while seeking visual references for the *Shah Jahan* comic book, although I didn't question him further about his influences during the interview. Mr. Roy is a Bengali, after all, and was trained at the Government School of Art in Calcutta, the same school with which many of the Bengal School artists had been affiliated, including Abanindranath Tagore.

Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) was the most esteemed artist of the Bengal School of Art, a group of artists that promoted a new aesthetic of "Indianness" in the early twentieth century.[29] Abanindranath was "discovered" by E.B. Havell, Principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta from 1896-1905, and championed by him for his "Indian" style of painting. Havell applauded Abanindranath's adoption of a Mughal style of painting and his rejection of the standards of Western academic art.[30] In the early phase of his career, Abanindranath painted a series of three paintings on the subject of Shah Jahan and the Taj Mahal. Of the three, "The Passing of Shah Jahan" (1902) earned him the most recognition, and quickly came to be considered a masterpiece of Indian art. Tapati Guha-Thakurta has discussed this phase of Abanindranath Tagore's career in detail, noting that in defining himself as a modern Indian artist, Abanindranath sought to

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[28] Souren Roy, ibid.

[29] On Abanindranath Tagore and the Bengal School, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Artists and Aesthetics: Abanindranath Tagore and the 'New School of Indian Painting'," in *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 226-312; also Pulinbihari Sen, ed., *Abanindranath Tagore: Golden Jubilee Number* (Calcutta: Indian Society of Oriental Art, 1961).

[30] Cited by Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Artists and Aesthetics: Abanindranath Tagore," ibid., 242. Also see E.B. Havell, "The New Indian School of Painting," *The Studio*, vol. 44 (July 1908), 107-117, and "The Future of Indian Art" in *Indian Sculpture and Painting: With an Explanation of Their Motives and Ideals* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1980 [1908]), esp. pp. 260-273.

infuse the classical Indian poetic element of *bhāva*, or emotion, into the Mughal miniature style of painting.[31] With particular reference to "The Passing of Shah Jahan" as the epitome of this new style, she writes:

> The architectural façade which frames the picture is most obviously Mughal in its painstaking replication of the rich inlay-work decoration on marble and the intricate railing patterns. The attention is, however, focused on the two small figures of the dying emperor and his daughter at his feet; and, then, drawn to the tiny image of the Taj Mahal in the distance, through the twist in the emperor's head and the direction of his gaze. The centrality of these images is intended, in turn, to convey the central theme of death and eternal separation, and the symbolism of the transitoriness of life *vis-à-vis* the immortality of art.[32]

The emphasis on emotion (bhāva) in this painting was further emphasized by references to the legend of Shah Jahan in art circles. These references attempted to "explain" the painting through the romantic narrative of Shah Jahan's life that had by then become standard, and which focused on the loss of Shah Jahan's beloved wife and his imprisonment within the Agra Fort. One such narrative, written by Sister Nivedita, appeared in *The Modern Review* in 1907, in which the sadness and the joy of Shah Jahan's final night – as illustrated by Abanindranath in "The Passing of Shah Jahan" – was articulated. Discussing first the sadness, she wrote:

> To joyous courtship succeeds long widowhood. On brilliant empire supervenes the seven-years' imprisonment. He, before whom the whole world bowed, is thankful and proud to win at last the long-sweet faith and service of a single-daughter prison-cell! … What were the memories and what the hopes that thronged the shadows in which Shah Jahan spent those last long years?[33]

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[31] On bhāva and classical Indian poetics, see "Indian Poetics" in *The Literatures of India: An Introduction* by Edward C. Dimock, Jr., et al. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974); also Bharat Gupt, *Dramatic Concepts Greek and Indian: A Study of the Poetics and the Natyasastra* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1994).

[32] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Artists and Aesthetics: Abanindranath Tagore," op. cit., 243; the painting "The Passing of Shah Jahan" can be seen on page 244, Fig. 56.

[33] Sister Nivedita, "Notes on Paintings," in Pulinbihari Sen, ed., *Abanindranath Tagore: Golden Jubilee Number*, op. cit., 107. Her comments on Abanindranath's "The Passing of Shah Jahan" first appeared in *The Modern Review* in May of 1907.

Sister Nivedita next described those very memories that she imagines must have sustained Shah Jahan through his final night, emphasizing not eternal separation, as Tapati Guha-Thakurta sees it, but the joy of eternal reunion that will soon be his:

> Ponder, beyond the bend, like some ethereal white-veiled presence, stands the Taj – *her* taj, her crown, the crown he wrought her. But to-night it is more than her crown. To-night, it is herself. To-night she is there, in all her old-time majesty and sweetness, yet with an added holiness withal. To-night, beyond the gentle lapping of the waters, every line of stately form speaks tenderness and peace and all-enfolding holiness, waiting for that pilgrim – with weary feet, bent back, and head so bowed, alas! – who comes, leaving behind alike palace and prison, battlefield and cell of prayer, to land on the quiet shore of the yonder side of death.[34]

Other explanatory narratives of this painting followed. One notable narrative of Shah Jahan's "dying scene" was written by the historian Jadunath Sarkar and published in *The Modern Review* in 1915. Discussing this scene, Sarkar wrote:

> Finally, while the sacred verses were being solemnly intoned, amidst the wail of the women and the sobs of his attendants, Shah Jahan, retaining full consciousness to the last and gazing on the resting-place of his beloved and long-lost Mumtaz Mahal, repeated the Muslim confession of faith. … A moment later he sank peacefully into his eternal rest. It was a quarter past seven in the evening. The body lay in the octagonal tower (Musammam Burj), where life had departed, in full view of the Taj Mahal, where he wished his mortal remains to mingle with those of his queen.[35]

Prior to Abanindranath Tagore's painting, Shah Jahan's final days had not been visualized. Mughal artists had painted many portraits of Shah Jahan, and these portraits were sketched by later artists, both Indian and European – but what was typically found notable in such portraits was the level of detail of the garments and jewelry.[36] When Western artists began to depict the Taj Mahal in the late eighteenth century, they were awed by its "sublime" qualities, and attempted to capture the inexpressible beauty of the

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[34] Sister Nivedita, "Notes on Paintings," ibid.
[35] Jadunath Sarkar, "The Passing of Shah Jahan," *The Modern Review* (October 1915), 366.
[36] See Pratapaditya Pal, "Romance of the Taj Mahal," op. cit., 194-199.

monument.[37] Neither the portraits nor the landscapes contained narrative elements or attempted to convey substantial emotion. Abanindranath's painting depicting the pathos of Shah Jahan's final days imprisoned in the Jasmine Tower and his last glimpse of the Taj Mahal, therefore, was a new innovation in Indian painting, one that corresponded to the increasing attention that the romantic narrative of the Taj Mahal and its creator were receiving at the time in British India. "The Passing of Shah Jahan" received several awards: a silver medal at the Delhi Durbar Exhibition of Indian Arts and Crafts (1902-3) where it was first exhibited, and a gold medal at the Congress Industrial Exhibition (1903). After Abanindranath received such recognition for this painting, other artists – both Indian and Western – were quick to take up the same theme.

One such Western artist was Albert Goodwin (1845-1932), who visited India in 1917 and painted "The Jasmine Tower, Agra Fort" the next year after he had returned to England. In this painting the Taj is featured on the far horizon, with figures gazing out at it from the Jasmine Tower. In Pratapaditya Pal's words, this watercolor features "the evanescent view of the Taj as seen by the hapless emperor for the last eight years of his life from the Jasmine Tower in the Agra Fort."[38] An Indian artist who took up this theme around the same time was Abdur Rahman Chughtai (1897?-1975), the "Artist of the East," who created several Taj-themed paintings in his early career. A.R. Chughtai was loosely affiliated with Abanindranath and was influenced by the Bengal School of Art, but at the same time was critical of the school's use of Muslim themes, for he felt that "the Bengali Movement in essence became a Hindu revival movement."[39] As a Muslim

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[37] Pratapaditya Pal argues that if the sublime is understood as an alternative to the more classical ideal of beauty, then the Taj Mahal was the sublime monument par excellence for late-eighteenth century artists. See his "Romance of the Taj Mahal," ibid., 203.

[38] Pratapaditya Pal, "Romance of the Taj Mahal," ibid., 217. This painting is featured as Figure 225 in Pal's article.

[39] A.R. Chughtai, *Beauty and Power: A Survey of Art in Pakistan* (Lahore: Chughtai Museum Trust, 1987), 11. Partha Mitter notes that Abanindranath Tagore had hoped to promote the Bengal School style of art in

who traced his lineage to the architect who is said to have designed the Taj Mahal, Chughtai felt that he was the right artist to depict the great monuments of the Mughals and the legends surrounding them – in essence, to lay the foundations for a "revival of Muslim painting."[40] Two of Chughtai's most acclaimed paintings are "Shah Jahan Looking at the Taj" **[Fig. 5.4]** and "Jahanara and the Taj" (ca. 1922), paintings that are clearly indebted to Abanindranath's earlier rendering of Shah's Jahan's final days.[41] Like Abanindranath, Chughtai also studied Mughal miniature painting, and thus his paintings similarly evidence the "meticulous care with which he has drawn out the architectural details of the columns and their arches in the background."[42] Chughtai's paintings also share a similar perspective, that of the expanse of water between the Agra Fort and the Taj Mahal as it is seen from within the Jasmine Tower. In "Shah Jahan Looking at the Taj," as in Abanindranath's "The Passing of Shah Jahan," this expanse of water serves to heighten the emotion of Shah Jahan's final days. Here the aged emperor stands, his back bent under the unbearable weight of his final years, and peers across the dark water at the Taj, presumably taking his last glimpse of it. Collapsed at the bedside is his daughter, Jahanara, waiting with the Holy Quran at the ready. The painting "Jahanara and the Taj" captures a later moment, just shortly after Shah Jahan's death. Here it is Jahanara who stares out at the Taj Mahal across the water, while kneeling at her father's now empty bed. Yet as in Chughtai's first painting, here too emotion is central to the image.

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the northwest through A.R. Chughtai, and that Chughtai paid homage to Abanindranath. However, other sources, most notably Chughtai's son, dispute this relationship. See Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 335-336; Arif Rahman Chughtai, *Artist of the East: Abdur Rahman Chughtai* (Lahore: Chughtai Museum Trust and Nisar Art Press, 1976), n.p.

[40] A.R. Chughtai, *Beauty and Power*, op. cit., 11. On Chughtai's claim to be related to the architect of the Taj Mahal, see Arif Rahman Chughtai, *Artist of the East*, op. cit., n.p. On the plausibility of this claim, see Janice Leoshko, "Mausoleum for an Empress," op. cit., 70.

[41] I am grateful to Chandralekha Maitra and Lyla Muncherjee at Osian's (Mumbai) for providing me with this image of A.R. Chughtai's "Shah Jahan Looking at the Taj." For an image of his "Jahanara and the Taj," see Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, op. cit., 337.

[42] Razia Siraj-ud-din, ed., *Chughtai's Paintings* (Lahore: Print Printo Press, 1970 [1940]), n.p.

Jahanara's loss is palpable – both of her parents will now be reunited in the great tomb across the water, but her father's death leaves her alone in the prison that is the Jasmine Tower, and marks the end of a great era.

Whether intentional or not, there are many ways that the cover and final panel of the *Shah Jahan* comic book make reference to these earlier images by Abanindranath Tagore and A.R. Chughtai: in the skilled use of architectural details; in the perspective, which positions the bed frame within the Jasmine Tower so that the body of water between the Agra Fort and the Taj Mahal is highlighted; and, most importantly, in the emphasis on bhāva or emotion. Discussing Chughtai's paintings, James Cousins appropriately summarized that Chughtai retained the "mood and posture of the Persian tradition," but that his lines, his folds of drapery, and his decorative architectural backgrounds all "call the imagination away from the tyranny of the actual into free citizenship of the realm of romance."[43] Like Abanindranath and Chughtai, Souren Roy also studied Mughal portraits of Shah Jahan in order to develop his own profile of the emperor for this final image, and similarly acquainted himself with the relevant architectural details.[44] Yet the artist's intent here as well was clearly to move beyond Mughal portraiture in order to convey some of the romantic sentiment of Shah Jahan's legend. In this final panel of the comic book, text and image together conclude on an overtly romantic note. Shah Jahan is shown lying on his prison-bed within the Jasmine Tower, taking his last glimpse of the Taj Mahal, the great mausoleum that he built for his beloved wife. The text at the bottom of this panel tells us that "Shah Jahan died in 1666 at the age of seventy-four. He was buried beside his beloved Mumtaz Mahal."[45] It is a

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[43] James H. Cousins, "Foreward" to *Chughtai's Paintings*, ed. by Razia Siraj-ud-din, op. cit., n.p.
[44] Souren Roy, interviewed by the author in Calcutta, February 05, 2002; on Abanindranath Tagore's technique, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Artists and Aesthetics: Abanindranath Tagore," op. cit., 245.
[45] *Shah Jahan*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 204 (Bombay: India Book House, 1979), 31.

fitting end to the romantic legend of Shah Jahan, an end that reunites the emperor and the empress after their lengthy separation. But it is also an end that leaves the reader with a memory of Shah Jahan as a feeble, lovesick, pathetic old man who was imprisoned by his own son – the very image of Shah Jahan that was fostered during the colonial period.

AKBAR THE 'ACCOMMODATING' AND AURANGZEB THE 'PURITAN'

The cover of the *Akbar* comic book (no. 200, 1979) features Akbar (r. 1556-1605) on horseback, commanding his armies to attack the Rajput stronghold of Chittor **[Fig. 5.5]**. This was a decisive battle against Udai Singh that Akbar won in 1567, a victory that was quite important because in the wake of it many Rajput leaders submitted to Akbar's suzerainty. This cover is particularly interesting because it is an ideal example of Souren Roy's statement, previously cited, on the process of choosing the cover image: "For example, if the story is about a historical king who won an important battle, then the cover should show that king, should depict something about that battle, and should depict the king's bravery in battle."[46] We can tell from the cover alone, then, that a primary focus of the *Akbar* issue is this emperor's martial abilities – unlike the *Shah Jahan* issue.

Indeed, Akbar's martial victories are highlighted throughout this issue. The comic book begins with an episode that occurred when Akbar was just thirteen years old, and had been newly crowned emperor after the sudden death of his father, Emperor Humayun (r. 1530-56). Seeking to take advantage of Akbar's youth and inexperience, an opposing chief named Hemu invaded Agra and then Delhi while Akbar was away in the Punjab. A battle was waged between Hemu's and Akbar's forces in Delhi, and Hemu emerged victorious. Akbar, guided by his chief minister Bairam Khan, then began the march back to Delhi to reclaim the city, while Hemu led his troops towards Akbar to engage him personally in battle. After an arrow struck Hemu in the eye, the comic book

[46] Souren Roy, interviewed by the author in Calcutta, February 05, 2002.

tells us, Hemu's men fled the battlefield, resulting in a victory for the Mughal forces in this battle, known as the Second Battle of Panipat **[Fig. 5.6]**. The comic book next informs the reader that, "poor Hemu's headless body was displayed on a gibbet" in Delhi, in keeping with the "cruel practice in those days."[47]

On one occasion when I asked Anant Pai about scriptwriting, I was treated to a long story about the making of the *Akbar* comic book, one that eventually came back to this very panel featuring Hemu. I first asked Mr. Pai what he looks for in a good script, to which he responded:

> The story should have an element of surprise. The reader should constantly ask, "What will happen next?" and he shouldn't be able to predict the end. There must be a climax, and then the victory of good over evil. Or, if evil wins, then the good one must not succumb. The good one may die, but he won't accept defeat. And after this climax the story should end quickly.[48]

I next commented that it sounds like the central characters – even historical ones – are intentionally written as heroes, as "good guys." Mr. Pai followed up in this way:

> Yes. Take the example of Akbar. After the Battle of Panipat, Hemu was defeated. Akbar was very young, just thirteen years old, and he ordered Hemu's headless body to be hung at the gate for all to see. This is disturbing, but it is a historical fact, it can't be avoided. Yet it need not be emphasized. So I chose to have this shown in long shot, not in close-up. That way, you see, Akbar stays a hero. He must be the hero of this issue from beginning to end. Rana Pratap and Akbar fought one another, but both are heroes. Rana Pratap is a hero in *his* issue, and Akbar is a hero in *his* issue. Rana Pratap was right, he was fighting for his country, for the land of his fathers. But Akbar's father's father also claimed India as his homeland. And Akbar was a good king. He was very accommodating. He removed the tax on Hindu pilgrims… [and] he spread word that all religions are equal.[49]

On another occasion while Mr. Pai and I were discussing the *Akbar* issue, he went into more detail about this panel and the controversy surrounding it during the production

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[47] *Akbar*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 200 (Bombay: India Book House, 1979), 7.
[48] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 15, 2002.
[49] Anant Pai, ibid.

process. According to Mr. Pai, the late Toni Patel, author of the *Akbar* script, insisted that a panel be included that depicted Hemu's headless body. When Mr. Pai vetoed this panel because of its violent content, she "was adamant that it be included," since it was "true, factual."[50] So, a compromise was ultimately reached: the hanging headless body would be shown, but only from a long-shot, and in shadows in the background – as it appears in the *Akbar* issue to this day. I asked Mr. Pai why he didn't want to depict this scene, and he shared with me a bit about his philosophy of violence, and the need to minimize violent images in these comic books that are made for children:

> This is the motto that I work under: 'One must tell the truth, one must tell what is pleasant; but don't tell what is unpleasant just because it is true.' In Sanskrit this is 'satyam bruyāt priyam bruyāt mā bruyāt satyam apriyam.' You see, Indians have a generally good view of Akbar. He was a good king, very accommodating. Not in his youth, but he changed. You know, we promote integration through *Amar Chitra Katha*. So why show bad things about Akbar – why not show that he was a good king? He had Muslim poets in his court who were devotees of Ram and Krishna… Aurangzeb, on the other hand, was not good. You know, he killed his brothers and their children too. On his father's – Shah Jahan's – birthday he gave him the gift of Dara Shukoh's head! So Aurangzeb has not been featured.[51]

I cite these quotes at length because they provide great insight into how the Mughals are represented in this comic book series and the internal debates that erupted around such representations during the production process. For Anant Pai, the central characters of the comics must be heroes, and that means that any violent actions or other repugnancies they have committed must be minimized in the telling of their stories. For Toni Patel, however, reporting the facts – the "truth" – about the central characters' lives was more important than casting those characters in a pleasant light. But what is perhaps

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[50] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, February 18, 2002.

[51] Anant Pai, ibid. John Stratton Hawley, who interviewed Anant Pai in 1989, reports that Mr. Pai related this Sanskrit maxim to him as well in their discussion of the problem of violence, and cited the *Akbar* issue as the famous case underlying his policy of depicting only what is pleasant while relating the "truth." See John Stratton Hawley, "The Saints Subdued: Domestic Virtue and National Integration in *Amar Chitra Katha*," in L. Babb and S. Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 115-118.

most telling is that this disagreement arose over the *Akbar* issue, and not over any of the earlier issues about historical Hindu kings. In Chapter 4, for instance, I discussed former associate editor Subba Rao's statement that all of the "gray episodes" of Shivaji's life were intentionally left out of the *Shivaji* (no. 23, 1971) issue, in order to better portray this seventeenth-century Hindu king as a hero.[52] Yet although this heroic portrayal of Shivaji has received some external criticism, it did not cause any internal disagreements among the producers of the comic book series. Nor did the depiction of the beheading of Afzal Khan in the *Shivaji* comic book cause Anant Pai to invoke his philosophy of violence.[53] When asked further about how the "gray episodes" of historical characters' lives are overlooked in the production process, Subba Rao also cited the example of the *Akbar* issue as the touchstone of this policy of telling the "pleasant truth," although his memory of the exact panel that was under debate is slightly different:

> [W]hen Toni Patel wrote the *Akbar* issue, she wanted to show how he had his throne placed upon a platform that was built of decapitated human heads, you know, from battle. Human heads. Mr. Pai wouldn't allow this. But Toni Patel said she wanted to show character development, how Akbar was this way when he was young, but how when he was older he was the creator of the Din-i-Ilahi, and was so tolerant, so accommodating. So in the end there was a compromise reached, with an image that was not very graphic, and the character development remained. So you cannot have violence, cannot have sexuality, because the comics are for children.[54]

What is particularly interesting about all of these insights into the production of the *Akbar* issue is the repeated emphasis on how "accommodating" Akbar was. Despite the cover image, it would seem that Emperor Akbar is a hero not because of his great military victories – in fact, as we have seen some of his military actions are intentionally

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[52] Subba Rao, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 5, 2002.
[53] See *Shivaji*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 23 (Bombay: India Book House, 1971), page 13.
[54] Subba Rao, ibid.

minimized – but because of his policy of accommodation, or, in Anant Pai's words, because "he spread word that all religions are equal."

As the *Akbar* issue progresses and Akbar grows up, Akbar's accommodating qualities are increasingly stressed. When Akbar marries a Rajput princess, we are told that "[t]hough one reason for this alliance was to gain Hindu support, it was also an expression of the doctrine of religious tolerance, which Akbar increasingly practised."[55] The next several panels detail this doctrine of religious tolerance, a doctrine that is said to be born of Akbar's "secular beliefs" **[Fig. 5.7]**: Akbar appoints Hindu officers to command his military, he abolishes the *jizya* tax (the poll tax that was levied on all non-Muslim subjects), and he allows Hindu festivals to be celebrated at his court along with Muslim festivals. In these panels Akbar is counterposed with the orthodox Muslim mullahs, the "zealots who think there is only one path to heaven" and who "hated the enlightened policies of their ruler."[56] After his victory at Chittor, Akbar further consolidates his empire and is thus able to devote more time to spiritual matters. We are told that Akbar "invited people of all religions to hold discussions in his palace," but that he was dissatisfied with the sectarian bickering that resulted.[57] Ultimately, therefore, Akbar created his own spiritual path, known as Din-i-Ilahi ("Divine Faith"), which was a synthesis of religious beliefs from Islam, Hinduism, and other religions. The comic book ends with a reference to this new religion, and comments that when Akbar died at the age of sixty-three, "he bequeathed to the future his ideal of a unified country of diverse religions and cultures" **[Fig. 5.8]**.[58] This final panel of the *Akbar* issue features a noble bust of Emperor Akbar in front of the Panch Mahal ("Palace of Five Stories") at Fatehpur

[55] *Akbar*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 200, op. cit., 20.
[56] *Akbar*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 200, ibid., 21.
[57] *Akbar*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 200, ibid., 31-32.
[58] *Akbar*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 200, ibid., 32.

Sikri, the capital city built by Akbar in a style that combined both Islamic (Persian) and Hindu architectural elements.[59] It is a fitting memorial tribute to an emperor who has been remembered as a good, "accommodating" leader and as a proponent of "secular beliefs."

In this comic book, "secular beliefs" are paired with the "doctrine of religious tolerance." As Anant Pai puts it, "secularism means that you can't bring religion into politics."[60] But according to his definition of secularism, religion and governance need not be strictly separated into public and private realms; rather, the government should allow for multiple religious beliefs to publicly exist side-by-side: "A Hindu can be secular if he respects Hinduism and other religions too."[61] With respect to Akbar, Mr. Pai elaborated that Akbar was the only Mughal ruler to embrace such "secular beliefs":

> Akbar was secular, because there were Hindus at his court, like Birbal. And there were many Muslims in his court who respected and even worshipped Krishna – they composed devotional poetry to Krishna! Only Akbar was this way, though, not the other Mughals.[62]

If Akbar is held up as an exemplar of secular values here, then the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707) is held up as the opposite – an orthodox puritan. As cited above, Mr. Pai contrasted Akbar with Aurangzeb, describing the former as "good" and thus deserving of a comic book issue that portrays him as a hero, and the latter as "not

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[59] Discussing the Panch Mahal and other buildings that share a courtyard at Fatehpur Sikri, Michael Brand and Glenn D. Lowry write: "As a group, the buildings in and around this courtyard form a passage of architecture unique in Islamic India, and display perfectly the experimentation and yearning for new forms that characterize Akbar's personality during the Fatehpur-Sikri years." See their *Akbar's India: Art from the Mughal City of Victory* (New York: The Asia Society Galleries, 1985), 48-50. For a further discussion of North Indian architecture and Hindu-Muslim identities, see Catherine B. Asher, "Mapping Hindu-Muslim Identities through the Architecture of Shahjahanabad and Jaipur" in D. Gilmartin and B. Lawrence, eds., *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 121-148.

[60] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 21, 2002.

[61] Anant Pai, ibid.

[62] Anant Pai, ibid. Birbal was a Hindu minister in Akbar's court, and has become a favorite figure in Indian folklore today. See the Appendix for the many *Amar Chitra Katha* titles devoted to relating tales of Birbal's famous wit.

good," and thus not deserving of heroic portrayal in a comic book. Perhaps this is why Aurangzeb, the last of the "Great Mughals," is the only one who has not had an *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book title created in his name. Instead, Aurangzeb has had to settle for second billing, sharing a rarely reprinted title with his eldest brother, Dara Shukoh (1615-59).

The cover of the *Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb* issue (no. 232, 1981) makes it very clear that Aurangzeb is not the hero of this comic book, despite the fact that he was the brother who ultimately became emperor: while Dara Shukoh takes center stage, riding his horse and waving to the assembled subjects, Aurangzeb is nowhere to be seen **[Fig. 5.9]**.[63] Early in this issue the differing viewpoints of the two brothers are made clear: Dara Shukoh, eldest and favorite son of Shah Jahan, is described as "an ardent follower of the liberal Muslim saint, Mian Mir," whose doctrine he believes can unify Hindus and Muslims. Aurangzeb, on the other hand, feels that the one sure way to unify the people is through forced conversion, for in his opinion "there should be one state, one religion."[64] Throughout this comic the vast differences between the two brothers continue to be highlighted: while Dara Shukoh spends his time translating the Hindu Upaniṣads into Persian, Aurangzeb is shown to be plotting Dara's downfall.[65] When their father Shah Jahan becomes ill, Aurangzeb recognizes the illness as the opportunity he has been waiting for, and the ensuing "war of succession" occupies the second half of the comic book. Ultimately, of course, Aurangzeb emerged victorious from this war, but in this retelling of the events the reader's sympathy is entirely with Dara, who fights bravely until the bitter end – as the "hero" should, according to the comic book format – while

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[63] Because the *Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb* issue has rarely been reprinted, and has never been reprinted as a Deluxe Edition, it is no longer available for purchase today. I have scanned Fig. 5.9 from a copy of the original issue that is on file at the India Book House library.

[64] *Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 232 (Bombay: India Book House, 1981), 6.

[65] *Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 232, ibid., 15.

Aurangzeb, having just ordered his henchmen to murder Dara, smirks and says to himself, "Father will now see which of us is the greater person."[66] There can be no doubt that the greater person of the two is Dara Shukoh, "an idealist, a scholar and a philosopher" whose "mission in life was to promote harmony among Hindus and Muslims."[67]

Although the *Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb* issue features a Muslim "hero," the contrast drawn between the two brothers in the comic book leaves the reader with the overall impression that the syncretistic, heterodox brother is the good one – the hero – while the *sharia*-oriented, orthodox brother is the bad one – the antihero. The tragedy, of course, is that it was the antihero, Aurangzeb, who emerged victorious in the end, and lived to enforce his puritanical and anti-Hindu reign upon the people of India. This contrast between the "good" Muslim and the "bad" Muslim has an interesting history of its own. While Shah Jahan came to be understood as a romantic and tragic figure when the British were consolidating their power in the colonial period, Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb came to embody the tension between two opposing views of Islam, the "heterodox" and the "orthodox," and the war of succession was understood as a metaphor for the trends of syncretism and separatism that were said to have been growing since the advent of Islam in India. Dara Shukoh was frequently described by colonial scholars and historians as the heir to his great-grandfather Akbar's syncretistic ideals, for as a Sufi scholar he sought to find a common denominator between Islam and Hinduism, as in his book *Majma al-bahrain* (*The Confluence of Two Oceans*) in which he compared Sufi expressions with technical terms of Hinduism. Aurangzeb, on the other hand, was usually characterized as having a stern, orthodox attitude – a "zealot" reminiscent of

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[66] *Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 232, ibid., 31.
[67] *Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 232, ibid., inside front cover.

those despised by his great-grandfather in the *Akbar* issue – in no small part because Dara was found guilty of apostasy in 1659 and executed upon Aurangzeb's order. Like Sir William Wilson Hunter, who described Aurangzeb as a "puritan Muhammadan monarch" and blamed his *sharia*-oriented orthodoxy for the fall of the Mughal Empire, many other colonial historians similarly condemned Aurangzeb in their attempt to distinguish British rule from Mughal despotism.[68]

As this characterization of Aurangzeb proliferated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, visual renderings of Aurangzeb's cruelty were also created. The artist Abanindranath Tagore, for instance, painted "Aurangzeb Examining the Head of Dara" in the early 1900s. Discussing this painting in some detail in *The Studio*, E.B. Havell wrote: "The story is told with great dramatic feeling. The artist makes us feel the curiously complicated character of Aurangzib; his cruelty, suspiciousness, and hypocrisy, combined with religious fanaticism and inflexibility of purpose."[69] Significantly, Anant Pai's comment, previously cited, that Aurangzeb has not been featured as a hero in this comic book series because he was so cruel as to give his father, Shah Jahan, "the gift of Dara Shukoh's head" is reminiscent of this emotional reading of Abanindranath's painting.

The persistence of this characterization of Aurangzeb as a puritan in both Western and Indian scholarship in the postcolonial period is rather astounding. For instance, the esteemed scholar of Islam, Annemarie Schimmel, has explicitly and causally connected the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 with the religio-political tensions of the seventeenth century:

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[68] Sir William Wilson Hunter, "The Ruin of Aurangzeb," op. cit.; see also Sir Henry M. Elliot, ed., *History of India as Told by Its Own Historians* (New York: AMS Publications, 1966 [1849]); and James Mill, *The History of British India* (London: J. Madden, 1858 [1817]).

[69] E.B. Havell, "The New Indian School of Painting," op. cit., 115. The painting is reproduced on p. 106 of the Supplement to this issue of *The Studio*.

> The tension inherent in the many-sided and colourful Indian Islam seems to be expressed best in the two sons of Shahjahan and Mumtaz Mahal…: Dara Shikoh the mystic and Aurangzeb the practical, orthodox minded ruler reflect those trends, which were to result in the partition of the Subcontinent in 1947.[70]

As Sajida S. Alvi has noted, modern historians belonging to rather different schools of thought have continued to either deplore Aurangzeb as a puritanical, *sharia*-oriented, anti-Hindu emperor, or to exalt him as the reviver and upholder of Islamic traditions.[71] Despite such different perspectives, however, from the colonial period forward a majority of these historians have agreed on the "facts" – though their valuations of them differ – that Aurangzeb engaged in the destruction of Hindu temples and the forced conversion of Hindus and other Indians to Islam. However, as Richard Eaton has recently shown, the "fact" that Aurangzeb destroyed a great number of Hindu temples is based on considerable misunderstanding of a passage in the *Ma'athir-i 'Alamgiri* concerning an order issued by Aurangzeb in 1669. This order was not a general order for the destruction of all temples, as it has often been interpreted, but was targeted at two sites where a particular mode of teaching was occurring.[72] Similarly, the "fact" that the majority of Indian Muslims were forcibly converted to Islam by foreign Muslim rulers – also known as the "religion by the sword" theory – has been debunked by many scholars over the past several decades.[73]

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[70] Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980), 2; see also pp. 96-97. One might also see Aziz Ahmad's discussion of Aurangzeb as "developing a separatist trend" in his *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 191 and 198.

[71] Sajida S. Alvi, "Islam in South Asia," in A. Nanji, ed., *The Muslim Almanac* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1996), 62. The poet Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) is an example of a person who exalted Aurangzeb, upholding him as an ideal figure whose self-control was a model for the Indo-Muslim community. See Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 175; also Muhammad Iqbal, *The Muslim Community: A Sociological Study*, ed. by Muzaffar Abbas (Lahore: Maktab-e-aliye, 1983), 16-17.

[72] Richard Eaton, "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," in D. Gilmartin and B. Lawrence, eds., *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 246-274.

[73] See Richard Eaton, "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India," in R. Martin, ed., *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), 106-123; Bruce

Nonetheless, the durability of such "facts" about Aurangzeb and his policies is evident in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series. In one scene in the *Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb* issue, one of Aurangzeb's spies is shown reporting to Aurangzeb about Dara Shukoh's activities. He says: "Prince Dara has presented a stone railing to a temple in Mathura and restored to the infidels the temple of Chintaman which you had converted into a mosque." Aurangzeb responds, in a close-up shot that highlights his anger, "Shuja, Murad and I must together act fast to save Islam from this heretic."[74] In this scene we see the temple issue highlighted as a primary indicator of the vast gulf that exists between Dara the syncretist, who makes generous donations to Hindu temples, and Aurangzeb the separatist, who forcibly converts Hindu temples into Muslim mosques.

In another comic book, *Guru Tegh Bahadur* (no. 114, 1976), the issue of forced conversion is also raised. Towards the end of this issue, which is a hagiography of the ninth Sikh Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-75) is approached by some prominent Hindus of Kashmir who seek the Guru's help. Their problem, we are told, is "the religious intolerance of the Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb."[75] One man explains that "Hindus in Kashmir are being severely repressed by Aurangzeb and their women-folk are being kidnapped," while a second man pleads with the Guru for help, saying, "All Hindus are being forcibly converted to Islam."[76] Upon learning of this situation, Guru Tegh Bahadur writes to Aurangzeb with a challenge: if he is able to convert the Guru to Islam, then all of the Hindus of the country will also accept Islam. But if he fails, then

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B. Lawrence, "Early Indo-Muslim Saints and Conversion," in Y. Friedmann, ed., *Islam in Asia*, vol. 1 (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 109-145; Peter Hardy, "Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia: A Preliminary Survey of the Literature" in N. Levtzion, ed., *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979); and Carl W. Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), esp. pp. 155-186.

[74] *Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 232, op. cit., 15.

[75] *Guru Tegh Bahadur*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 114 (Bombay: India Book House, 1976), 24.

[76] *Guru Tegh Bahadur*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 114, ibid., 24.

Aurangzeb must "give up his perverted policy of forcible conversion."[77] Aurangzeb is intrigued, in part because Guru Tegh Bahadur – a Sikh – is claiming to be the Guru of a group of Hindus, hence he has the Guru brought before him in court. There the Guru tells Aurangzeb that, "every community must have the right and the freedom to practise its religion."[78] But Aurangzeb is not satisfied with this lecture. He asks the Guru whether he will embrace Islam, and when Guru Tegh Bahadur responds in the negative, Aurangzeb has him thrown into jail. There the emperor's men attempt – with the threat of force – to convince the Guru to convert. The Guru, however, is not intimidated. He responds with a very modern-sounding statement about the secular nature of India: "India is a land of many races, religions and cultures. It is wrong to impose one's religion on those who believe differently."[79] Ultimately, Aurangzeb is unable to persuade the Guru to convert to Islam, so he orders his beheading **[Fig. 5.10]**. In this full-page panel, Guru Tegh Bahadur is shown seated in prayer, serenely awaiting his death, while one stern-looking Muslim henchman lectures him, possibly offering him a final chance to convert to Islam and thereby save his life, and another eagerly approaches with a large knife. Here no words are necessary, for the reader is able to discern through the image alone who is righteous and who is not.

The *Guru Tegh Bahadur* issue came up during a conversation that I had with Anant Pai on the subject of Hindu identity. For Mr. Pai, a Hindu "is one who believes in the indestructibility of the soul – atma – and who believes in reincarnation based on karma."[80] I asked whether Buddhists and Jains would be considered Hindus then, and Mr. Pai replied that they would, that Buddhism and Jainism are sects of Hinduism. I next

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[77] *Guru Tegh Bahadur*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 114, ibid., 25.
[78] *Guru Tegh Bahadur*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 114, ibid., 25.
[79] *Guru Tegh Bahadur*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 114, ibid., 26.
[80] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 26, 2002.

asked, what about Sikhs? Mr. Pai replied in this way, with reference to Aurangzeb and Guru Tegh Bahadur:

> Yes, Sikhs are also Hindus. You know, there was even a tradition among Hindus to give the eldest son to Sikhism, so that he may fight for the country. So Sikhism is also a sect of Hinduism, otherwise why would Hindus do this? Also, when Aurangzeb was forcibly converting people to Islam, the Pandits of Kashmir went to Guru Tegh Bahadur to be saved. Tegh Bahadur wrote to Aurangzeb, saying that he is considered a *pir* among the Hindus of the north, and that if Aurangzeb could convert him, all the Hindus would follow in his footsteps. But if he could not, then Aurangzeb must leave all the Hindus alone. So you see, even Guru Tegh Bahadur considered himself a Hindu.[81]

Rajinder Singh Raj, a Sikh who acts as the Honorary Consultant of Punjab and of Sikhism for India Book House and who has researched and scripted several *Amar Chitra Katha* issues about Sikh historical figures, had a different opinion on the subject of whether Sikhs – including Guru Tegh Bahadur – are Hindus. He oversaw the production of the *Guru Tegh Bahadur* issue, conducting the original research for the story, finding a Sikh artist, Ranjana, to do the illustrations, and checking the script for accuracy. When asked whether he considered Sikhs to be Hindus, he replied:

> Take the example of the Muslims in India. They were forced converts – ninety per cent of them are former Hindus, former backward class or tribal people. The Muslim invaders forced people to convert, they took away thousands of girls to other countries. But no one now says that these Muslims today are Hindu. The Sikhs have their own identity, like the Muslims. Their identity began in April of 1699, when Guru Gobind gave the Sikhs the five symbols, the five Ks. This is where our rare identity comes from, and no other religion has that. Each symbol carries great significance. Without the *kirpan* – the sword – we would have been slaves. Without that symbol our identity would have vanished long back… without the weapon, Brahmanic or Islamic culture would've eaten us up. Now we're established as a separate identity and community.[82]

The statements of Anant Pai and Rajinder Singh Raj demonstrate how two very different conceptions of identity underlie the production of the *Guru Tegh Bahadur* issue. The

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[81] Anant Pai, ibid.

[82] Rajinder Singh Raj, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 6, 2002.

first statement by Anant Pai echoes the definition of the term "Hindu" that has been put forward by proponents of Hindutva (Hindu nationalism), while the second statement by Rajinder Singh Raj aligns with the now dominant Sikh position, carefully articulated in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that Sikhs are not Hindus.[83] The *Guru Tegh Bahadur* comic book itself is ambiguous – intentionally, I would argue – in that it does not clearly state that Guru Tegh Bahadur was a Hindu or that he was not a Hindu, only that Hindus, like Sikhs, venerated him as a Guru. The final words of the issue state that the Guru "is remembered with love and admiration by people of all creeds."[84] Careful attention has been paid to the wording of this issue in order to accommodate the multiple intentions of the editor, the scriptwriter, and the illustrator, and to allow for different interpretations on the part of the audience.

Despite the differing opinions about Guru Tegh Bahadur's religious identity that arose in the production process, however, all involved parties agreed that Aurangzeb – to the contrary of Guru Tegh Bahadur's best counsel – did everything in his power to tear down what his great-grandfather Akbar had built up and bequeathed to his heirs: the "ideal of a unified country of diverse religions and cultures."[85]

THE DISCOURSES OF SECULARISM AND CONVERSION

Throughout the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series, examples of religiously tolerant, "secular" rulers abound who appear to conform to Anant Pai's definition of secularism as a syncretistic form of political authority. In these issues, this very modern

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[83] For the foundational Hindutva definition of the term "Hindu," see V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969 [1923]). On the subject of Sikh identity, see N.G. Barrier, "Vernacular Publishing and Sikh Public Life in the Punjab, 1880-1910" in K. Jones, ed., *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 200-226, and Veena Das, "Counter-concepts and the Creation of Cultural Identity: Hindus in the Militant Sikh Discourse" in V. Dalmia and H. von Stietencron, eds., *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), 358-368.

[84] *Guru Tegh Bahadur*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 114, op. cit., 31.

[85] *Akbar*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 200, op. cit., 32.

idea of secular rule is cast backwards into the past in an attempt to demonstrate that India is indebted to neither the British nor the Mughals for its secular, democratic heritage. The introduction to *Ranjit Singh* (no. 49, 1974), for instance, describes this king as "one of the most broad-minded and secular rulers India has ever had."[86] In this issue, Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) engages in one military campaign after another, and gradually builds a large kingdom. Although Ranjit Singh is shown to be a devout Sikh, the comic book reassures us that "Ranjit Singh was not establishing a Sikh kingdom, but a Punjab state in which Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims enjoyed equal rights."[87] The page following this statement is divided into three panels, and shows Ranjit Singh taking part in the Hindu festival of Dassehra in the first one, visiting his Muslim friends on Id in the second one, and attending festivities with his Sikh family at the Golden Temple in Amritsar on the anniversary of Guru Nanak's birthday in the final panel. The following page then tells us that Ranjit Singh's court also "reflected his secular nature."[88] In the accompanying image Ranjit Singh is shown seated on his throne, with Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim officials surrounding him in court.

Similarly, the *Ahilyabai Holkar* issue (no. 74, 1975) informs the reader that this "pious Maratha queen" was "very orthodox in her religious beliefs but this never came in the way of her being a very efficient administrator."[89] This comic book shows us many of the Hindu temples that Ahilyabai (r. 1766-95) financed during her reign, but also emphasizes that her rule was just, stable, and conducted with great respect for all religions. If, then, Hindu and Sikh rulers like Ahilyabai Holkar and Ranjit Singh can be

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[86] *Ranjit Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 49 (Bombay: India Book House, 1974), inside front cover.
[87] *Ranjit Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 49, ibid., 16.
[88] *Ranjit Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 49, ibid., 18.
[89] *Ahilyabai Holkar*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 74 (Bombay: India Book House, 1975), inside front cover. For a brief discussion of current and colonial views of this saintly queen, see Eleanor Zelliott, "Ahilyabai Holkar: A Magnificent Ruler, Saintly Administrator," *Manushi*, vol. 124 (May-June 2001).

both orthodox and secular, why is the case so different with Muslim rulers? That is, why are the "good" Muslim rulers the syncretistic, even heretical ones, and the "bad" Muslim rulers the orthodox, even puritanical ones? Can't a Muslim ruler also be both orthodox and simultaneously tolerant of other religions? If not, what does this say about Islam and the place of Muslims in India? I turn now to the portrayal of Muslim figures – specifically the Mughal emperors – as antagonists in other issues of this comic book series, in an effort to more fully examine the representation of Muslims and the construction of "Indianness" in these comics.

In several issues featuring Rajput heroes, the Mughal emperors are cast as the antiheroes.[90] The *Rana Sanga* issue (no. 106, 1976) pits this Rajput king (r. 1509-27) against the Mughal emperor Babur. After Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi and established himself as the ruler of Delhi in 1526, Sanga and his companions begin to worry about this "invader," who they feel should be "driven out of [their] Motherland."[91] After making vows to the Hindu goddess Chandi and upon the Holy Quran, respectively, Rana Sanga and Babur gather their troops and eventually face off against one another **[Fig. 5.11]**. In this panel there can be no doubt that the war being waged by these forces is a religious war: the forces at the bottom left corner are marked with the Hindu color saffron, while the forces at the upper right corner are marked with the Muslim color green. Reminiscent of the saffron and green stripes of the tricolor Indian flag, which are separated by a plain field, here the image works in the opposite way: it does not suggest unity in diversity, but an unbreachable divide.

The *Rana Pratap* issue (no. 24, 1971) also portrays Rana Pratap's battle with Akbar as a religious war in which this Rajput king (r. 1572-97) struggles to drive the

[90] As they are in the issues featuring Marathas as heroes – see Chapter 4.
[91] *Rana Sanga*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 106 (Bombay: India Book House, 1976), 23.

Muslim "invaders" out of his "Motherland." Rana Pratap takes a vow before the Hindu goddess Kali, swearing that he will sacrifice his life for his kingdom, and that he and his men will refrain from sleeping on beds and wearing nice clothes until they have attained freedom.[92] When Akbar's Rajput commander, Man Singh, meets with Rana Pratap in a peace-making effort, Rana Pratap cannot disguise his feelings about Akbar: "He may be a king for you, but to us he is an invader, an enemy."[93] It is for such sentiments and his brave death that Rana Pratap is remembered today, immortalized in the comics as the "lone, unbending figure" whose "freedom was his honour, which he cherished even more than his own life."[94]

The *Amar Singh Rathor* issue (no. 171, 1978) features yet another Mughal emperor – Shah Jahan – as its antagonist. In this comic book, Shah Jahan is neither a capable military commander nor the great builder of romantic monuments. Instead, Shah Jahan is here depicted as a coward who flees to the *zenana* – the women's quarters – at the first sign of Rajput unrest, and whose masculinity is therefore mocked by his own wife, who tells him that if he is afraid then she "will deal with this mad Rajput. You wear these bangles and sit here."[95] Here again, the battle between the Rajputs and the emperor's forces is cast as a religious battle: just as Sanjay Joshi has commented, the Rajputs cry out the names of their Hindu deities on the battlefield, while the Mughal soldiers charge in the name of Allah **[Fig. 5.12]**.[96]

Again and again in these comics, the Mughals are cast as foreign invaders bent upon violating Mother India. In other issues – especially those featuring Aurangzeb and his ministers – the subject of conversion is repeatedly raised. In the *Guru Gobind Singh*

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[92] *Rana Pratap*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 24 (Bombay: India Book House, 1971), 4-5.
[93] *Rana Pratap*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 24, ibid., 11.
[94] *Rana Pratap*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 24, ibid., inside front cover.
[95] *Amar Singh Rathor*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 171 (Bombay: India Book House, 1978), 10.
[96] Sanjay Joshi, "ACKs: Distorted History or Education?" op. cit.

issue (no. 32, 1972), Gobind Singh (1666-1708) embarks upon a "dharma-yuddha" – here understood as a religious war against Muslims – after Aurangzeb has Gobind Singh's father, the Sikh Guru Tegh Bahadur, killed.[97] As Gobind Singh's following grows, Aurangzeb decides that he must once again attack and put down the Sikh community. During the battle, Wazir Khan, one of Aurangzeb's officers, captures two of Guru Gobind Singh's sons and tells them, "If you become Muslims your lives will be spared." The boys' courageous yet polite rejoinder is, "Never! We have nothing against Islam. But we are Sikhs and Sikhs we will remain."[98] The next panel shows the boys smiling as they receive their death sentence, for they prefer to be bricked alive between two walls than to forcibly convert to Islam.

In these issues featuring the Mughals as antagonists, then, the Mughal emperors are not merely opposing kings who battle the heroes of various comic book issues; rather, these issues suggest that Muslims are either foreigners who have invaded India, or else Hindus and other "natives" of India who have converted to Islam under the threat of the sword. It is a communal understanding of identity, one that conceives of Hindus and Muslims as two distinct, religiously defined communities, where the Hindus are the rightful occupants of India, who must defend their land, community, and faith from the Muslim invaders. Together, the episodes featuring Muslim protagonists and antagonists convey the message that while Hindus and Sikhs can be secular rulers who generously and publicly tolerate other religions, Muslim rulers – with the notable exception of the great Mughal Emperor Akbar – cannot.

Court histories and other medieval sources, however, demonstrate that in the premodern period it was not a nationalistic and religious concept of identity that was

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[97] *Guru Gobind Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 32 (Bombay: India Book House, 1972), 5.
[98] *Guru Gobind Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 32, ibid., 20.

prevalent, but a variety of ethnic ones. In her study of Sanskrit and Telegu inscriptions in Hindu temple complexes in Andhra Pradesh from the early stages of Muslim military presence to ultimate Muslim dominance, Cynthia Talbot has shown that religion was not the central feature of identity. She argues that whereas both Hindus and Muslims used the language of "us-versus-them" in conjunction with symbols of their religious heritages to strengthen emergent identities, the primary motivation of these images was not religious. Instead, they were aimed at consolidating community allegiance, whereby community was understood as a separate ethnic group with its own language, costume, marriage customs, and territory, in addition to religion.[99] Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya has also investigated the representation of Muslim "others" in medieval Sanskrit inscriptions and literary texts, noting that the terms used for Muslims were either ethnic names (such as *Tājika*, *Turuṣka*, *Paṭhāṇa*), terms derived from countries of origin (such as *Pārasīka*, *Garjaṇa*), or generic terms used in earlier periods (such as *Yavana*, *Mleccha*, *Śaka*).[100] Similarly, on the topic of medieval Islamic views of India, Carl Ernst notes that the term "Hindu" was first used in Persian sources as a geographical nomenclature for the people living near the river Sindhu, and that Hindu also became an ethnic term in Ghaznavid times (ca. 990), referring in Persian poetry to the black complexion of the Indian as opposed to the fair-skinned Turk.[101] Taken together, these studies suggest that medieval identities were "segmented" identities: there were multiple communities identified by locality, language, caste, occupation, and sect.[102] But there was no concept of a uniform religious community.

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[99] Cynthia Talbot, "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-colonial India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37.4 (1995), esp. pp. 719-721.
[100] Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *Representing the Other? Sanskrit Sources and the Muslims* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1998).
[101] Carl Ernst, *Eternal Garden*, op. cit., 22-29.
[102] Romila Thapar, "Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity," *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 23, no. 2 (1989), 222.

Whence, then, did the notion, now taken for granted, of an essential difference between Hindu and Muslim – now defined exclusively in religious terms – arise? And why should the subjects of conversion and secularism be bound up in this communal narrative of identity? I want to suggest that the roots of this narrative plot lie in the period of colonial modernity. In her detailed study of conversion in India, Gauri Viswanathan has argued that it is apparent from the last quarter of the nineteenth century – when the first all-India British census reports were commissioned – that Hindu-Muslim relations were conceptualized by the British as a relationship of either "native to convert" or "native to foreigner." She writes that whereas the latter was the privileged relationship in Muslim self-definitions of the time, the former was the chosen relationship of the British census takers:

> In its preoccupation with the question of Muslim origins, the [1901] census revealed its own bias toward downplaying the foreign element in the composition of Indian Muslims, only one-sixth of whom were placed as Arab – or Pathan – descended Muslims. The rest were listed as local converts from Hinduism who still preserved habits and usages from the religion they had supposedly repudiated. The census report consistently accentuates the "Hinduness" of Muslim converts in proportion to minimizing the self-definitions of those whom it sought to enumerate.[103]

This preoccupation with proving the Hindu origins of the majority of Indian Muslims was due, Viswanathan argues, to British zeal to demonstrate "the existence of a volatile and dynamic society, constantly in flux," which would "confirm some of the positive consequences of outside intervention."[104]

Indeed, the British were preoccupied not only with the origins of Muslims in India, but with the origins of Hindus as well, as can be evidenced from the nineteenth-century obsession with the theory of Aryan race. Proponents of this theory then argued

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[103] Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 161.
[104] Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, ibid., 170.

that the Indo-Europeans who "conquered" India in ancient times created the Hindu religion and civilization; thus Aryanism was seen to define the "true" Hindu community.[105] According to this theory, then, Hindus were the "native" Indians, distinct from Muslims, who were therefore understood to be either medieval "conquerors" or recent Hindu-cum-Muslim converts.

These nineteenth-century theories about Hindu-Muslim relations laid the groundwork for the rise of Hindu-Muslim communalism. Gyanendra Pandey, for instance, has examined the colonial construction of communalism through the communal riot narrative, demonstrating that the elaborate lists of recent Hindu-Muslim riots that were drawn up by colonial officials in the 1920s were quickly extended backwards, taking the record of Hindu-Muslim strife back to the beginning of colonial rule and then into the precolonial period. By the end of the nineteenth century, he writes, the argument that the "natives" are hopelessly divided, given to primitive passions and incapable of managing their own affairs worked to legitimize British power.[106] While Pandey's discussion of the communal riot narrative is quite valuable, it is also important to point out that colonial officials were not solely responsible for communalism. As several scholars have recently demonstrated, nineteenth-century communitarian narratives were

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[105] For histories of the Orientalist construction of the Aryan racial theory, see Thomas Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Ronald Inden, "Orientalist Constructions of India," *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 20, no. 3 (1986), 401-446. For recent criticisms of this Orientalist theory, see R.S. Sharma, *Looking for the Aryans* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1995); Romila Thapar, "The First Millennium B.C. in Northern India," in R. Thapar, ed., *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1995), 87-150; K. Meenakshi, "Linguistics and the Study of Early Indian History," in R. Thapar, ed., *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History*, ibid., 60-86; and George Erdosy, *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language, Material Culture, and Ethnicity* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 1-31. For an example of the significance that the Aryan theory still has today in Hindu nationalist politics, one may turn to the controversy that was aroused by Michael Witzel and Steve Farmer's argument that Harappan culture is not Vedic culture in their article "Horseplay in Harappa," *Frontline* (Oct. 13, 2000), 4-14, as seen in the flood of response articles and letters in the Oct. 27, Nov. 10, and following issues of *Frontline*.

[106] Gyanendra Pandey, "The Colonial Construction of 'Communalism': British Writings on Banaras in the Nineteenth Century," in R. Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies VI* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 132-68.

in fact constructed through the interaction of colonial and indigenous initiatives. Vasudha Dalmia's study of Bharatendu Harischandra (1850-85) and Sudipta Kaviraj's discussion of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94) are two excellent examples of influential nineteenth-century Hindu authors who made ancient India the classical source of Indian modernity and the Muslim period the source of the decline of the "golden age" in their constructions of a modern Hindu identity.[107] In both Bankimchandra's novels and Harischandra's writings, Hindus are imagined as a distinct, religiously-defined community that is opposed to a separate Muslim community.

At the same time that prominent Hindus were solidifying a modern Hindu identity, of course, Muslim intellectuals were forging a modern Muslim community that was similarly marked through language, literature, and religion. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817?-98) expounded upon the Muslim *qaum* or community in India, while poets like Altaf Hussain Hali (1837-1914) and Muhammad Husain Azad (1830-1910) wrote patriotic Urdu verses about a Muslim identity that was both Indian and Islamic, in an effort to forge a place for Muslims within Indian nationalism.[108]

Since the end of the colonial period and the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the communal conception of identity has only intensified – as have the debates within India about secularism and conversion. At the very time that the Indian Constitution was being ratified, debates over both secularism and conversion were

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[107] Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harischandra and Nineteenth-century Banaras* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998). For a further discussion of Bankimchandra's novels and nationalism, see also Tanika Sarkar, "Imagining Hindurashtra: The Hindu and the Muslim in Bankim Chandra's Writings," in D. Ludden, ed., *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 162-184.

[108] On Hali and Azad, see Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); see also Gail Minault, trans. and ed., *Voices of Silence: English Translations of Khwaja Altaf Hussain Hali's Majalis un-nissa and Chup ki dad* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1986). On Muslims and Indian nationalism, see Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*, op. cit.; and Faisal F. Devji, "Hindu/Muslim/Indian," *Public Culture* vol. 5, no. 1 (Fall 1992), 1-18.

raging. Article 25(1) of the Indian Constitution, which sets forth the fundamental right of Indian citizens to the freedom of religion, says, "Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of the Part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion." However, as P.N. Bhagwati, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India, has pointed out, the word "secular" appeared in neither the original Preamble to the Indian Constitution nor in this Article guaranteeing freedom of religion.[109] This is because at the time that the Constitution was being framed, there was widespread agreement that India should be a secular state, but considerable disagreement about the exact meaning of the term "secular."[110] In the West, the term "secular" typically entails the separation of church and state; but during the Constitutional Assembly Debates the argument was put forward that secularism in India should instead mean that the state tolerates and respects all religions. What is interesting is that in these same debates about religious freedom and the definition of secularism, the subject of conversion was repeatedly raised. The inclusion of the word "propagate" in Article 25 alarmed several members. One argued that in a secular state religion was a private affair and therefore should not be propagated; another argued that including the word "propagation" paved the way for the annihilation of Hinduism – defined as a secular, integrated way of life – because proselytizing religions like Islam and Christianity would have an unfair advantage.[111] Those who favored the inclusion of the word "propagate," on the other hand, argued that Hindus,

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[109] P.N. Bhagwati, "Religion and Secularism Under the Indian Constitution," in R. Baird, ed., *Religion and Law in Independent India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993), 8.

[110] See T.N. Madan, "Secularism in Its Place," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4 (Nov. 1987).

[111] See the discussion of Tajamul Husain's and Lokanath Misra's arguments by Ronald W. Neufeldt, "To Convert or Not to Convert: Legal and Political Dimensions of Conversion in Independent India," in R. Baird, ed., *Religion and Law in Independent India*, op. cit., 318-319. Also see Gauri Viswanathan, "Preface" to the 2001 edition of *Outside the Fold*, op. cit., xi-xx.

especially members of the Arya Samaj, did indeed engage in the practice of conversion, and that members of all religious communities should have this right in a secular state.[112]

Even after the ratification of the Constitution, debates over the definition of secularism and the proper place of conversion in a secular state continued. Numerous Lok Sabha Bills, State Acts, and Supreme Court cases attest to these ongoing debates. For example, the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act (1967) and the Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantrya Adhiniyam Act (1968) both invoke the language of religious freedom in order to place restrictions on the act of conversion of minors, women, and members of scheduled castes.[113] In consideration of such ongoing debates, the Constitution was ultimately amended. In 1976, in the midst of the Emergency, the 42nd Amendment was enacted by Indira Gandhi, which formally added the word "secular" before the words "Democratic Republic" in the Indian Constitution. The next year, in 1977, Article 25 of the Indian Constitution was amended in a Supreme Court ruling that declared that the right to "propagate" religion did not, after all, extend to the right to convert. Thus even as India was increasingly being defined as a secular state, limits were being placed on the practices of proselytizing religions – specifically, Islam and Christianity. Discussing such amendments and acts, Gauri Viswanathan writes:

> Ostensibly secular in motivation, the bills to ensure freedom of religious conscience were primarily intended to protect Hinduism against the incursions of other proselytizing religions, revealing the collusion of the state in the preservation of Hinduism.[114]

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[112] Ronald W. Neufeldt, "To Convert or Not to Convert," op. cit., 319-320. On the practice of conversion – or "reconversion" – by the Arya Samaj, see Kenneth W. Jones, "The Arya Samaj in British India, 1875-1947" in R. Baird, ed., *Religion in Modern India*, third edition (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 26-54.
[113] Ronald W. Neufeldt, "To Convert or Not to Convert," op. cit., 320-324.
[114] Gauri Viswanathan, "Preface" to the 2001 edition of *Outside the Fold*, op. cit., xiv.

Such moves on the part of the Indian Government have even prompted some scholars to argue that although India may be secular in name, in practice it promotes religious intolerance.[115]

The *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books on the Mughal emperors show the marked influence of colonial scholarship in the way that these figures are still thought of and depicted today. But the repeated references to the subjects of secularism and conversion in these and the other comics discussed in this chapter – most of which were written in the 1970s – must also be understood within the larger context of the legislative, judiciary, and public debates about religious freedom and the right to propagate that were ongoing in postcolonial India. These debates took place at a time when communal politics were continuing to gain momentum, and the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics therefore reflect the hierarchical relationship between the religious and the secular that developed from the Hindu majoritarian community's efforts to broaden its scope by legally defining Hinduism as a secular and tolerant way of life, rather than as a religion per se, while simultaneously minimizing the influence of non-Hindu religions, especially Islam, which were considered a threat to the majority community because of their proselytizing nature.[116] In other words, these comics illustrate the larger failure to solve what Gauri Viswanathan has termed the "problem" of modern secularism: "how modern secularism can accommodate and absorb the reality of religion and the powers of religious

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[115] See Ashis Nandy's provocative article, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance," in V. Das, ed., *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots, and Survivors in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[116] On the distinction between Hinduism as a broad legal category (which according to the Indian Constitution includes Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs, but not Muslims, Christians, Parsis, or Jews) and Hinduism as a religion, see Robert D. Baird, "On Defining 'Hinduism' as a Religious and Legal Category," in R. Baird, ed., *Religion and Law in Independent India*, op. cit., 41-58. On the hierarchical relationship between the religious and the secular in India, see T.N. Madan, "Secularism in Its Place," op. cit.

conviction experienced by believers, while at the same time protect the rights of those who believe differently."[117]

The *Chaitanya Mahaprabhu* issue (no. 90, 1975) perhaps best illustrates this point. This comic book retells many of the incidents in the life of Chaitanya (1486-1533), who would later be known as the founder of a form of Hinduism known as Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Here Chaitanya is presented as a complex figure: he is a leader of the people who preaches that "all men are equal"; who teaches the citizens of Nabadwip not to yield to injustice and untruth; and who launches "the first-ever non-cooperation movement (satyagraha, as Gandhiji later called it)."[118] He is also a devout worshipper of the Hindu god Krishna who "not only stemmed the tide of conversion to Islam, but also provided a new life force to Hindu religion" by converting the whole town of Nabadwip to his new religion, including Kazi Barbahak, the Muslim administrator of the town who had tried to squash the devotees' public displays of devotion to Krishna **[Fig. 5.13]**.[119] In this comic book, conversion to Hinduism is presented in a positive light as a spiritually fulfilling force for the individual and a socially uplifting force for society, and those who choose to convert do so of their own free will, with no threat of force. Furthermore, Chaitanya is here presented as a leader of the people who is both tolerant and devout. Again we see that a Hindu figure can be both broad-minded and god-minded, both staunchly devout and simultaneously secular, while Muslim leaders – like the Kazi – cannot.

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[117] Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, op. cit., 173; also see T.N. Madan on the "failure of secularism" in South Asia in "Secularism in Its Place," op. cit., 750.

[118] *Chaitanya Mahaprabhu*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 90 (Bombay: India Book House, 1975), inside front cover.

[119] *Chaitanya Mahaprabhu*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 90, ibid., inside front cover and 24.

SEEMING 'FAIR AND SECULAR'

In 1985, the infamous Shah Bano Supreme Court case revitalized the debate about secularism in India.[120] In this case, the Supreme Court ruled that Ahmed Khan, a Muslim from Madhya Pradesh, was required to pay maintenance to his ex-wife, Shah Bano, under Section 125 of the Criminal Code. Many Muslims protested this decision, arguing that Islamic law required that Ahmed Khan return the marriage settlement (*mehr*) to his wife and pay her maintenance (*iddat*) for a period of three months only. As Muslim protests gained momentum, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi reversed his earlier support of the decision and introduced a new bill, the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill, that stated that in accordance with Islamic law a Muslim woman is entitled to maintenance for the *iddat* period only. Rajiv Gandhi argued that this bill "would further secularism in India by ensuring religious communities of fundamental rights."[121] Many Hindus, however, were outraged, and argued that this bill was a step backwards from outlining a uniform civil code and that it would further sunder India's unity.

I mention the Shah Bano case by way of conclusion because it was repeatedly brought up by Hindus while I was conducting my field research in 2001-2, more than fifteen years later. While discussing the definition of "Hinduism" with Anant Pai, he explained that Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs had only recently begun to identify themselves as members of separate religions – that is, as religious minorities. This, he explained, was because "in its zeal to sound impartial the government has made many concessions to minorities." When I asked him to explain, he responded:

> There is one famous Supreme Court case – the Shah Bano case. The Supreme Court constantly changes its ruling whenever the mullahs complain. You see, the

[120] My discussion of the Shah Bano case here is indebted to Kavita R. Khory's article, "The Shah Bano Case: Some Political Implications," in R. Baird, ed., *Religion and Law in Independent India*, op. cit., 121-137.

[121] Cited by Kavita R. Khory, "The Shah Bano Case," ibid., 131.

> government is not impartial, though it pretends to be. The so-called secularists, they are only interested in getting votes, getting the minority communities to vote for them. They are not interested in fixing the problems with the Constitution, with the system. So they cater to the minority communities. This is the problem with our system today.[122]

Anant Pai is not a member of a Hindu nationalist group, and often speaks critically of the communal activities that are sponsored by such groups. During my conversations with him in late 2001 and early 2002, for instance, he was particularly dismissive of the renewed agitation over Ayodhya as thousands of Hindutva karsevaks were once again converging upon the disputed site of the Ramjanmabhoomi temple. Nonetheless, this discourse of "pseudo-secularism" demonstrates how even mainstream members of the Hindu majoritarian community have come to perceive themselves as being under attack in postcolonial India. They believe their community is being attacked on multiple fronts: by proselytizing religions like Islam and Christianity that they believe seek to convert Hindus out of the fold; by liberal advocates of secularism who they believe promote equal representation of religious communities despite the fact that Hinduism is the religion of a majority of Indians; and by politicians who they believe cater to religious minorities in exchange for votes. The government must not only be fair and secular, Mr. Pai stated on another occasion, it must also *seem* fair and secular: "You see, this is what I have to say about secularism. When there are two kids in the family, you must sound and seem just and fair." The government has failed at this, he continued, but "we at *ACK*, we make no distinction between the two children – we try to be fair."[123]

In Mr. Pai's opinion, being fair – or being secular – means recognizing that there are more Hindus in India than there are members of any other religion; thus one must acknowledge the dominant position of Hinduism while also acknowledging the place of

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[122] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 21, 2002.
[123] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 15, 2002.

Islam and other religions in India. This, he feels, he has done in his comic book series. But a few others involved in the production process disagreed. Yusuf Bangalorewala, a former artist for the comic book series and one of the few Muslims to have worked for the company, felt strongly that one of the "two children" was more favored than the other:

> *ACK* was launched for a large, pan-Indian audience by Hindus pretending to be secular. Aurangzeb and Muslim freedom fighters were sidelined, and gray-zone mystics such as Kabir and Dara Shukoh were chosen as representative of the Muslim hue. The Mughal and Muslim trimmings afforded IBH [India Book House] a cloak of respectability in the eyes of the Muslim intelligentsia. The first book was *Krishna*. The main corpus forms a full course in Hinduism.[124]

Although Yusuf was originally very enthusiastic about working for *Amar Chitra Katha* since he was a fan of the comic book genre, and although he remains proud of the issues he illustrated, especially *Mirabai* (no. 36, 1972), he decided to quit the company in the early 1990s. As communal violence escalated during this decade, Yusuf renewed his commitment to Islam, and in 1999 he threw away his original artwork and stopped "illustrating living beings in accord with Islam."[125]

Together, I believe, the statements of Anant Pai and Yusuf Bangalorewala attest to the irreconcilable differences that arose within the production process in the attempt to define an Indian identity that was both "fair and secular," and to the various ways in which the larger colonial and postcolonial discourses on communalism, conversion, and secularism have shaped the definition of "Indianness" that was ultimately arrived at in this popular medium.

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[124] Yusuf Bangalorewala, written correspondence with the author, April 12, 2002.
[125] Yusuf Bangalorewala, ibid. and August 21, 2004.

Chapter 6: Massacre and the Mahatma: Showing and Telling Gandhian Politics in *Amar Chitra Katha*

While conducting my field research at the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book studio, the authors and artists that I spoke with frequently expressed very different ideas about the ideal relationship between text and image, and about whose duty it is to ensure that the proper relationship is arrived at. This multiplicity of approaches to text-image relations can, on occasion, be a source of tension, when two codes – the textual and the visual – do not integrate but instead compete for the reader's attention. As several scholars have argued, the power of the comic book medium lies in this very combination of verbal and visual languages, wherein words and images become superimposed on each other in the perceptual activity, "encouraging both affective and cognitive responses."[1] Yet precisely because the visual images in comic book panels do not necessarily exist in a one-to-one relationship with the verbal, they may in fact have experiential or associative ties that work to produce meanings extending beyond the text.

For instance, in one panel of the *Rabindranath Tagore* (no. 136, 1977) comic book, Hindu-Muslim solidarity is emphasized on the occasion of the British partitioning of Bengal along communal lines in 1905 **[Fig. 6.1]**. The text in this panel reads: "Rabindranath was gripped by the fever of nationalism and entered the fray. On Rakshabandhan day, he tied raakhis on the wrists of Muslim friends and volunteers."[2] Rabindranath himself says, in a word balloon, to the Muslim on whose wrist he ties the

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[1] See Ann Marie Seward Barry, *Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 107-140.

[2] *Rabindranath Tagore*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 136 (Bombay: India Book House, 1977), 21. *Rakshabandhan* is a festival that traditionally celebrates the bond of love between brothers and sisters. A sister ties a *raakhi* bracelet around her brother's wrist, and the brother in turn vows to protect his sister. During the national period, this festival also came to celebrate the fraternal bond between various groups – especially Hindus and Muslims – who together call "Mother India" their home.

raakhi: "This raakhi is the symbol of our unity. Nobody can separate us." This panel also shows a large group of Hindus and Muslims in the background together tying raakhis onto each other's wrists, symbolizing their fraternal ties, following the lead of the renowned poet and nationalist Rabindranath Tagore. Yet in this same panel, a polarization of Hindu and Muslim occurs: Rabindranath and the other Hindus are dressed in the "traditional" Hindu costume of flowing robes and shawls, while all of the Muslims are depicted in "traditional" Muslim garb, from their Jinnah-style jackets down to their fez caps (costumes which are not historically accurate). Whereas the text of this panel stresses brotherly unification between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia, the image is more ambiguous because of its technique of signifying through opposition: it could work to underscore unity in diversity and to suggest communal contrast being overcome, but alternately could be interpreted as a subversion of the text which reinforces Orientalist notions of essential difference between Hindus and Muslims. In this way, imagery may at times support the text and may at other times subvert it.

I believe that such ambiguity between text and image is often indicative of multiple intentions among the scriptwriter, the illustrator, and the editor in their various efforts to conceptualize "Indianness," and might also be interpreted in different ways by the audience. As W.J.T. Mitchell has argued, the image-text relation in mixed media is not merely a technical question, but a site of tension or conflict, "a nexus where political, institutional, and social antagonisms play themselves out in the materiality of representation."[3] It is this notion of the text-image relation as a nexus where sociopolitical antagonisms are played out that I want to investigate further in this chapter. In what follows, I examine the comic book issues on colonial-era freedom fighters, focusing especially on the depiction of Mahatma Gandhi in these issues. I consider text-

[3] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 90-91.

image relations in these issues, and draw upon my interviews with various authors and artists, in order to better understand the divide between the non-violent and revolutionary approaches to Indian nationalism and the place of Gandhi in India's national identity.

SHOWING AND TELLING

In comics, perhaps more than in any other modern medium, the relationship between word and image is a particularly interesting area of study. For, as many comics scholars have begun to point out, a wide variety of text-image relations can be found in comics: In some, especially those created by a single author/artist (sometimes known as a "graphiateur"), words and pictures may be remarkably integrated, as in Richard F. Outcault's *The Yellow Kid*.[4] In others, a more disjunctive relationship between words and pictures may be at work, in some cases quite intentionally, as in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*.[5] Discussing the abundance and variety of text-image interplay in the introduction to their study *The Language of Comics*, Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons write:

> The elements of the representational code which comics employs – including both images and texts, and also such specialized features as word balloons, zip ribbons, and even the panel frames which enclose scenes or segments of a narrative – can be manipulated with great sophistication. Throughout Europe and Latin America, and in Canada and Japan, comic books and comic strips are regarded as serious artistic and cultural productions.[6]

Although Indian comics are not yet commonly recognized as serious artistic products, I hope to demonstrate that text-image relations within them are nonetheless handled with great sophistication. How, then, does the relationship between text and image in the

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[4] See Richard F. Outcault, *R.F. Outcault's the Yellow Kid: A Centennial Celebration of the Kid Who Started the Comics* (Northampton: Kitchen Sink Press, 1995), and N.C. Christopher Couch, "*The Yellow Kid* and the Comic Page," in R. Varnum and C. Gibbons, eds., *The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 60-74.

[5] See Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), and Frank L. Cioffi, "Disturbing Comics: The Disjunction of Word and Image in the Comics of Andrzej Mleczko, Ben Katchor, R. Crumb, and Art Spiegelman," in R. Varnum and C. Gibbons, eds., *The Language of Comics*, op. cit., 97-122.

[6] Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons, eds., *The Language of Comics*, op. cit., ix-x.

Amar Chitra Katha comic books – between their verbal and visual narratives – work? Are text and image meant to exist in a one-to-one relationship in this mixed medium, to "say" the same thing in a two-tiered narrative? And if, indeed, this is the ideal, is it even possible, given that the text and images of these comics are produced by different people?[7]

Discussing text-image relations in the comic book medium in some detail, comic book author/artist Scott McCloud differentiates between seven types of text and image relationships: 1) "word specific" panels in which pictures illustrate, but don't significantly add to a largely complete text; 2) "picture specific" panels in which words do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence; 3) "duo specific" panels in which both words and pictures send essentially the same message; 4) "additive" panels in which words amplify or elaborate on an image or vice versa; 5) "parallel" panels in which words and pictures seem to follow very different courses without intersecting; 6) "montage" panels in which words are treated as integral parts of the picture; and 7) "interdependent" panels in which words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone.[8] This last category of text-image relations – the "interdependent" type – is the most desirable one, according to McCloud, for "in comics at its best, words and pictures are like partners in a dance and each one takes turns leading."[9]

McCloud's categories are a useful way of beginning to think about text-image relations in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books. In many ways, the *Amar Chitra Katha*

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[7] For a good discussion of text-image disjunction in medieval manuscripts as a result of the rise of professional illuminators, which meant that text and image were no longer produced by the same person, see Michael Camille, "The Book of Signs: Writing and Visual Difference in Gothic Manuscript Illumination," *Word and Image* 1 (1985), 133-148.

[8] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 153-155.

[9] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, ibid., 156.

comic artist is limited by the physical confines of the pre-written text: These comics are designed so that the narrator's voice runs across the top and/or bottom of the panels, and word balloons appear within the panels to convey dialogue. The artists are given pages with the panel divisions, the narrative text at the top or bottom of the panels, and the scripted dialogue bubbles already in place. Furthermore, the artists are given detailed written instructions by the scriptwriters that tell them what to draw in each panel.[10] Thus the text in these comic books is primary in that it is written first and the artist is given "a specific role in relation to language," confined "almost wholly after it and within it."[11] This mode of production might suggest that these comic books contain primarily "word specific" panels – using McCloud's terminology – in which the pictures illustrate, but don't significantly add to a largely complete text.

I asked Anant Pai, founder and editor of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, whether the goal was that the picture should match the text exactly. In his response he contrasted *Amar Chitra Katha* comics with *Tinkle*, a fictive comic book series that his company publishes for a much younger target audience:

> Well, with *Tinkle* we don't give very detailed visual directions to the artist. … The directions we gave for *ACK* were very detailed: we even gave the composition to the artist – who is on the left, who is on the right, that sort of thing. In *Tinkle* the artist only has to worry about matching the right character with the right dialogue bubble. But in *ACK* composition was very important. And we provided references to the artist… For example, what did the houseboat look like, when Rabindranath Tagore and Vivekananda met? We were very careful, because these *ACK* are authentic; *Tinkle* we are not so careful with because it is for entertainment only.[12]

For Anant Pai, then, a "word specific" approach is the best approach to text-image relations in these comic books. As an author and editor, this approach may seem the

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[10] For further information on the production process, please refer to Chapter 1.
[11] Micahel Camille, "The Book of Signs," op. cit.
[12] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 26, 2002.

most natural or desirable one to Mr. Pai, for it is the approach that best preserves and authenticates the authority of the word. The textual narrative can rarely be undermined when the accompanying visuals are reduced to mere illustrations. Other authors voiced similar "word specific" approaches to the text-image question. For instance, freelance author M.L. Mitra felt that:

> [A]ny writer visualizes everything he writes, from the beginning to the end. So you must tell the artist what you visualize. Sometimes artists themselves may decide, if they have read the original story, but it is always better for the scriptwriter to direct the visuals as well. The scriptwriter should edit the whole thing too; you must tell the artist the appropriate details – for instance, the right dress, architecture, that sort of thing.[13]

Author and former associate editor Kamala Chandrakant, however, voiced a very different theory of text-image relations – one that is much closer to McCloud's ideal "interdependent" category – when I asked her whether text and image should say exactly the same thing or should each tell different parts of the same story:

> Yes, the text and image should match perfectly. You see, the author gives the visual instructions. If the artist is good, then after the image is drawn some of the text will be deleted by the editor. When I edited the comic books I would delete some of the text if the text and image said the same thing, if the image could stand on its own. But if it is a weak image, then the copy is necessary. And often the script itself must be changed before an image can even be made. Often when I was editing scripts from the outside – that is, freelance scripts – I would have to take one frame and make it into three frames, or vice-versa. Many freelance writers try to make the comic book panel into an illustrated text. This should be avoided for the most part. You see, the narration panel tells one thing, while the balloons or dialogue carry the story forward. The ideal is to pack as much into the panel as possible. The narration and the balloons should be different. And the image should be even different from those two. It must all flow, move together – and fast! A slow pace isn't good for a comic book. A comic book shouldn't be too text-heavy. There should be a 50-50 blend of text and image – the script and the illustrations should melt into one another, and the reader shouldn't be able to understand one without the other.[14]

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[13] M.L. Mitra, interviewed by the author in Navi Mumbai, January 15, 2002.

[14] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.

Although Kamala Chandrakant begins by stating that text and image should match perfectly (the "duo-specific" model), she ultimately concludes with a theory of complementarity, wherein both text and image together convey an idea that neither could convey alone – indeed, the very definition of McCloud's "interdependent" model.

Many of the other comic book authors and artists that I interviewed expressed text-image theories that were similar to the "duo-specific" model. For instance, artist M. Mohandas stated: "The text and image convey the same thing. The images brought in by the creativity of the artist portray the same expressions and sequences explained in the texts so that they go hand in hand."[15] Similarly, artist Souren Roy felt that "the text and image should be exactly the same. That is the goal. But sometimes at the last minute they'll change the dialogue a little bit, in the studio. Ideally they should say the same thing."[16] Several authors, however, voiced a more sophisticated theory of text-image relations, theories that moved away from the "duo-specific" and towards the "interdependent" model, as had Kamala Chandrakant. Author and former associate editor Subba Rao, for instance, felt that "[t]hey are complementary to each other – the text need not say in so many words what the picture shows."[17] Freelance author Yagya Sharma agreed, explaining that there must be a "synergy between text and image":

> The visual directions to the artist should just be a general hint – something telling him where the dialogue balloons go, which character is on which side, perspective, etc. But the text and image… in a film the audio track can be different from the video track, because there is action, movement. In comics, however, there is no action, no movement. So the action must be described at times. I think the best way to put it is that there must be a synergy between text and image. The picture must match the text enough that they're not telling two different stories. And when it is not action but expression, then facial expression can say a lot, so sometimes no words are necessary.[18]

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[15] M. Mohandas, written correspondence with the author, April 30, 2002.
[16] Souren Roy, interviewed by the author in Calcutta, February 5, 2002.
[17] Subba Rao, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 5, 2002.
[18] Yagya Sharma, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 16, 2002.

Many other artists also spoke in terms of an interdependence or synergy between text and image. According to artist Yusuf Bangalorewala,

> the image is a result of visualization. It must enhance the script rather than merely represent it. The illustrator must help the scriptwriter tell his/her story with telling effect. In the traditional comic book narrative the illustration explains the situation, the people and the ambience.[19]

From these conversations I learned that various approaches to text-image relations were employed by the artists, authors, and editors involved in the production of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books. When I asked Kamala Chandrakant whether any ideas about the ideal relationship between text and image were ever discussed at the studio or with the freelance authors and artists, she replied:

> No, no. In fact, often the illustrator sees only the visual directions and the pictures – the references – not the text. Even if the text is there, sometimes the illustrator won't read it, just the directions. So it is the editor who must see to this blend of image and text.[20]

This claim that artists often don't read the textual narrative, that they read at most the directions they are given, was one that was repeated to me on several occasions by authors and associate editors, often as a way of further highlighting why it was the editor's duty to ensure that the proper relationship between text and image is arrived at. This may well be the case for some artists. Freelance artist Dilip Kadam, for example, stated that one of the reasons he prefers to work for another comic book company, the Delhi-based Raj Pocket Books, is that these comic books are written in Hindi, so he is able to read his instructions, as well as the entire textual narrative and dialogue, in his

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[19] Yusuf Bangalorewala, written correspondence with the author, April 12, 2002.

[20] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002; see also the quote from M.L. Mitra, above. This is not unlike Camille's discussion of the medieval illuminators, who did not have to read the entire text, but only the instructions in the margins. He notes that this "often results in a highly abstract displaced sort of illustration with figures used almost as mnemonic props rather than characters in action." Michael Camille, "The Book of Signs," op. cit., 141-142. In the production of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books, then, it is the editor who must ensure that the artist does not produce such displaced or abstract illustrations, and that text and image blend.

native language.[21] For those artists who are not fluent in English, the language in which the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics are created, reading the textual narrative and even the artist's directions can be quite difficult.

Other artists, however, are not only fluent in English but at times may even pay close enough attention to the text that they challenge the directions they are given. Yusuf Bangalorewala, for instance, refused to draw a tabla as he was instructed to for the *Tansen* (no. 75, 1974) comic book. He argued that in those days the tabla did not exist, and drew instead what he considered to be a more authentic drum for the period, one that was beaten on the sides, not on the top as the tabla is.[22] This is a minor example, and is phrased in the language of authenticity that the artist understood Anant Pai to be concerned with, but other artists also expressed their need to occasionally challenge the visual directions they are given. When I asked Pratap Mulick whether he always followed the instructions, he replied in the negative without any hesitation: "No, no. No, we do close-ups, long-shots, such things as we deem necessary. We choose the right perspective, the right composition. Because we know that part best."[23]

After speaking with Pratap Mulick, an artist who has worked with *Amar Chitra Katha* and other Indian comic book companies for many years, I began to re-examine text-image relations in the action scenes of these comics. Mr. Mulick explained to me that text and image need not match exactly, but should work together to tell the whole story, and gave examples of how this works in action scenes:

> Sometimes it happens that text and image are different. The two should work together to tell the whole story. For instance, the image can show a fight, or a fight ending, and the text can say that after the fight the hero returned home. They are two different moments that can be told in the same panel then. Or else,

[21] Dilip Kadam, interviewed by the artist in Pune, January 20, 2002 [Hindi].
[22] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 26, 2002.
[23] Pratap Mulick, interviewed by the author in Pune, January 21, 2002.

> the image can show action, and the text can provide information, thoughts, dialogue – things that can't be depicted easily.[24]

Three panels from the *Subhas Chandra Bose* issue (no. 77, 1975) demonstrate Mr. Mulick's point about the relationship between text and image in action panels **[Fig. 6.2]**. The first panel shows a scene between a college professor, Professor Oten, and a student, young Subhas Chandra Bose. The text reads, "But Professor Oten never forgave the boys. One day---" and the accompanying image shows Professor Oten smacking a student on the head with a stick, while he says (in a dialogue balloon), "Can't you walk without flapping your slippers?"[25] In this panel the image shows the action (the smack delivered upon the student's head by the professor), the dialogue provides the verbal justification for the action, while the narrative text explains the true motivation for the act (the professor is angry with the students, and especially Subhas, for the strike they recently organized in order to demand better treatment, and uses the first available excuse to vent his anger). In the next panel we are told that the students were furious, and see several of them questioning a guard about the professor's schedule. Then, in the third panel, the narrative text states: "As Professor Oten walked down the stairs---" while the accompanying image shows the students smacking him on the head with a stick and then fleeing the scene.[26] As Mr. Mulick described, in this action panel the text refers to one moment (when Professor Oten walked down the stairs), while the image depicts the next moment (when the students struck the professor and ran), so that through the text-image combination two different moments are depicted in the same panel.

The majority of the action panels in these comic books rely on this "interdependent" mode of text-image relations, although there are also quite a few panels

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[24] Pratap Mulick, ibid.
[25] *Subhas Chandra Bose*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 77 (Bombay: India Book House, 1975), 10.
[26] *Subhas Chandra Bose, Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 77, ibid., 11.

that rely on the "duo-specific" mode, wherein the text and the image each say the same thing, as in the three action panels in the *Rani Durgavati* issue (no. 104, 1976) in which the queen hunts a tiger **[Fig. 6.3]**.[27] However, there are also a few action panels in which the text does not seek to explain the action – which is self-evident – but instead tries to place it within an ideological framework. Like the captions in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which Mieke Bal has argued are a "rhetorical strategy where words are used to provide images with meanings they would not have otherwise," the text in these comic panels similarly seeks to impose order on the chaos of the images, to "reconcile instead of enhance tensions by shedding verbal light on visual objects."[28] One such panel can be found in the *Rabindranath Tagore* issue mentioned above **[Fig. 6.4]**. In the large half-page panel at the top of this page we see several soldiers firing on a large mass of people in front of a long wall. Those readers familiar with colonial Indian history would immediately recognize this as a depiction of the infamous Jallianwala Bagh massacre – the massacre that occurred when Brigadier General Reginald Dyer ordered fifty of his riflemen to open fire upon the crowd that had assembled at Jallianwala Bagh in the city of Amritsar on April 13, 1919, killing hundreds or even thousands, depending on the source. The lengthy text at the top of this panel reads:

> Rabindranath was deeply involved in his great experiments in education at Shanti Niketan. But he could not keep himself aloof from political happenings. The oppressive measures of the British had made Mahatma Gandhi give the call for hartal in 1919. Several hundred men and women had gathered at Jallianwala Baug [sic], in the Punjab. Suddenly---[29]

The other two panels on the bottom of this page go on to highlight how Rabindranath Tagore renounced his knighthood in protest over this incident, suggesting that

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[27] *Rani Durgavati*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 104 (Bombay: India Book House, 1976), 20.
[28] Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 31.
[29] *Rabindranath Tagore*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 136, op. cit., 28. A *hartal* is a "strike," a cessation of economic activity that is undertaken as an act of protest.

Rabindranath blamed the British for the massacre. Yet the text of this top panel makes a chain of causal connection between British oppression, Mahatma Gandhi's call for *hartal*, and the massacre. In this way, the text provides the image in this panel with a meaning that it would not likely have had otherwise, by associating the Jallianwala Bagh massacre with Mahatma Gandhi, a figure who is not visibly present in the scene.

What is the significance of this connection? That is, why is Mahatma Gandhi invoked in order to "explain" this image? In seeking an answer to this question, I turn to the larger *Amar Chitra Katha* corpus, for the relationship between text and image in this panel suggests that there is a significant degree of sociopolitical antagonism surrounding the figure of Gandhi and his role in the shaping of modern India – an antagonism that I believe to be present in the text-image relations found throughout this entire comic book series.

MAHATMA GANDHI: A 'LEADER OF THE NATION'?

A high degree of tension between text and image is evident throughout the first *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book about Gandhi, titled *Mahatma Gandhi I: The Early Days* (no. 414, 1989). This comic, which highlights Gandhi's life from his birth through his time in South Africa and up to the beginning of his political activity in India, contains twice as much verbiage as the average comic in the series. Far from the ideal fifty-fifty blend of text and image earlier mentioned by Ms. Chandrakant, this comic book features half a dozen panels containing no visual at all, only text. For instance, in the discussion of a South African bill that was designed to take away the voting rights of Indians, the panels are "word specific," in McCloud's terminology: the text dominates, and the pictures – when used – only serve as illustrations, without significantly adding to the

text.[30] Why is there such an emphasis on "telling" and not on "showing" in this comic book?

In her essay on the American Museum of Natural History, Mieke Bal discusses the tension between the objects displayed in the museum and the captions explaining them, stating that telling and showing are two modes of exposition that are meant to collaborate, but do not always do so.[31] Her discussion of the image of Queen Maya giving birth to the Buddha, disturbingly displayed in the Hall of Asian Mammals, is particularly insightful. This image is accompanied by a lengthy verbal caption, which causes her to ask what the specific meaning of the visual display is that necessitates it being sustained so emphatically by words. Discussing the textual reference to Buddhists as vegetarians (closer to animals in the East than in the West) in combination with the visual of a woman giving birth (nature versus culture), she notes that gender and ethnic politics are the surplus of ideological information that the panel with the verbal representation is conjured up to "explain."

Does the emphasis on "telling" over "showing" in the *Mahatma Gandhi I* comic book indicate, then, that there is a surplus of ideological information that the text of the comic is conjured up to "explain," as there was with the image of Queen Maya? And if so, what is it? The final panel of the comic book provides a clue **[Fig. 6.5]**. The last line of this panel, which is about the Indian National Congress session that was held at Amritsar in 1919, states: "Gandhi was established and acknowledged as a leader of the nation."[32] The accompanying image features a large, orderly, motionless crowd with only a handful of people in the back chanting "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!" ("Victory to

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[30] *Mahatma Gandhi I: The Early Days*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 414 (Bombay: India Book House, 1989), 14-15.
[31] Mieke Bal, "Telling, Showing, Showing Off," in *Double Exposures*, op. cit., 13-56.
[32] *Mahatma Gandhi I: The Early Days*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 414, op. cit., 31.

Mahatma Gandhi"). Down in the far right corner is a stage with four tiny figures on it, figures that are so small that hardly any of their features can be made out. Of these miniscule figures, one of the seated ones is shirtless and appears to wear a white *dhoti* – he is presumably Gandhi, although his identity is not otherwise explicit. The positioning of the spectator here, so that s/he is looking down upon Gandhi as if from a great distance, in conjunction with the rather unmotivated crowd, encourages distance between the spectator and the figure of Gandhi, rather than encouraging the view of him as a larger-than-life national figure. Thus although the concluding line of this comic book tells us that Gandhi is now a leader of the nation, the concluding image is more ambivalent about Gandhi's stature. In fact, throughout this entire comic book the viewer is never positioned so as to look up to Gandhi; this is quite unlike the perspective in many other comics, such as *Subhas Chandra Bose* (no. 77, 1975) and *The Gita* (no. 127, 1977), in which both the historical figure Subhas **[Fig. 6.6]** and the deity Krishna **[Fig. 6.7]** are larger-than-life figures, figures that cannot be contained even within whole-page frames and that tower above the human figures surrounding them.[33] In these two issues, text and image are united in the effort to convey the greatness of these two figures. For instance, as Arjuna beholds Krishna in his vast cosmic form, he bows and says to him: "I see you, infinite and omnipresent. You are beginningless and endless. In you the whole universe abides. Salutations to you."[34] Similarly, the introduction to the *Subhas Chandra Bose* issue states that "Netaji" Subhas Chandra Bose is one of the "figures larger than life" of

[33] Frances Pritchett notes that this image of Krishna is rare in that it actually breaks out of the frame: "the crest of Krishna's headdress sweeps right on upward beyond the ruled border at the top of the page." See her article "The World of *Amar Chitra Katha*," in Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 98-99. The image of Subhas Chandra Bose does not break out of the frame in the same way as the image of Krishna, but by depicting Subhas only from his thighs upward, the image suggests that he too is too large a figure to be contained within the frame.

[34] *The Gita*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 127 (Bombay: India Book House, 1977), 28.

the national movement for independence in India.[35] The introduction to this issue then goes on to contrast Netaji with Gandhi:

> Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose stands out as a dynamic, restless force in an era which had chosen the path of Gandhi, the path of peace and non-violent non-co-operation. Bengal chose to voice its protest militantly and Subhas Chandra Bose was a true son of Bengal.[36]

Perhaps, then, the disjuncture between text and image in the final panel of the *Mahatma Gandhi I* comic book has something to do with competing theories of nationalism, with two different schools of thought about the proper place of violence in the struggle for independence.

According to W.J.T. Mitchell, the real question to ask when confronted with image-text relations is not "what is the difference (or similarity) between the words and the images?" but "what difference do the differences (or similarities) make?"[37] The similarity of text and image in the *Subhas Chandra Bose* issue works to promote this figure as a national leader, a larger than life figure in the national movement, while the difference between text and image in the *Mahatma Gandhi I* issue calls into question this figure's alleged status as a leader of the nation. Evidence that the producers of these comic books were more certain about Subhas Chandra Bose's place in history than they were about Gandhi's can also be found in the fact that the *Subhas Chandra Bose* issue was published in 1975, but the *Mahatma Gandhi I* issue was not published until 1989. Indeed, when commenting on the selectivity of *Amar Chitra Katha*'s vision of the freedom struggle, Frances Pritchett highlighted this fact:

> Netaji [Subhas Chandra Bose] thus had his own issue as long ago as #77, followed by all the other important violent revolutionaries; V.D. Savarkar has his

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[35] *Subhas Chandra Bose*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 77 (Bombay: India Book House, 1975), inside front cover.
[36] *Subhas Chandra Bose*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 77, ibid.
[37] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, op. cit., 90-91.

> own issue; the industrialist G.D. Birla (382) now has his own issue – how totally inconceivable it is that Mahatma Gandhi does not have an issue! A delay of well over twenty years, in Gandhi's case, is inexplicable.[38]

As Frances Pritchett notes, many "violent revolutionaries" were featured in this comic book series long before Mahatma Gandhi was: after *Subhas Chandra Bose*, some of the other issues that featured twentieth-century figures who eschewed the non-violent path were *Chandra Shekhar Azad* (no. 142, 1977), *Bagha Jatin* (no. 156, 1978), *Bhagat Singh* (no. 234, 1981), *Rash Behari Bose* (no. 262, 1982), *Senapati Bapat* (no. 303, 1984), and *Khudiram Bose* (no. 364, 1986). The "inexplicable" delay in the production of the *Mahatma Gandhi I* issue, I suggest, is due to a rather strong ambivalence about the proper place that Gandhi should be given in the history of the freedom struggle, an ambivalence that is also manifest in the disjunction between text and image in this comic book, and is present in other ways as well.

Despite Gandhi's renown for his method of non-violent protest, he is always associated with violent outbursts in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books. Indeed, according to the *Mahatma Gandhi I* comic, Gandhi only came to be recognized as a "leader of the nation" immediately after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre occurred. Like the text-image pairing of the panel in the *Rabindranath Tagore* issue discussed above, which makes a causal connection between British oppression, Mahatma Gandhi's call for *hartal*, and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, this comic book makes a similar connection through its text-image pairing and the sequencing of its panels. We are told that Gandhi "took his first major political step in India" by calling for a nationwide *hartal* on April 6,

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[38] Frances Pritchett, "The World of *Amar Chitra Katha*," op. cit., 94-95. Nandini Chandra has similarly commented on the preference for revolutionary figures over others in this comic book series: "This valorization of a militant ideology has an insidious sub-text when one considers the fact that Gandhi and Nehru are completely sidelined, acknowledged in the ACK only in its penultimate titles. To add insult to injury, these titles are verbose and dull…" Nandini Chandra, "The Market Life of Amar Chitra Katha," *Seminar*, no. 453 (May 1997), 26.

1919, in protest over the Rowlatt Acts **[Fig. 6.8]**.[39] The "Rowlatt Acts" were two bills, written by Justice Sidney A.T. Rowlatt and introduced in the Imperial Legislative Council in February 1919, which were designed to allow the government to retain some of its wartime powers upon the advent of peace so as to better counteract revolutionary activity. Many Indians, however, saw these bills as a violation of their civil rights and some even characterized them as the culmination of British tyranny and oppression.[40] The image that accompanies this text shows an empty street with all of the shops closed. At the bottom of this same panel we are told: "A nation coming peacefully to a halt was quite a spectacle."[41] But this spectacle of peaceful protest was not very long-lived, we learn, for the very next panel informs us that after Gandhi was arrested on April 9 there were violent outbursts in Delhi, Amritsar, Ahmedabad, and Viramgam. Gandhi is shown deep in thought here, reflecting upon his "Himalayan miscalculation": his mistaken belief that the people would remain peaceful. In response to the violence, the narrative text at the bottom of this panel informs us that Gandhi called off his nationwide protest movement. The worst is still yet to come, however, for in the very next panel we are shown an image of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, with General Dyer commanding his troops to fire on the left side of the panel, and the citizens dying as they attempt to flee on the right side. The text tells us that General Dyer was angered by the violent outburst that had occurred in Amritsar and decided to punish the people:

> Then came April 13, Baisakhi, and the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar. An army officer, General Dyer, angered by the killing of some Englishmen in the city and the assault on an Englishwoman on the 10th by an excited crowd, wanted

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[39] *Mahatma Gandhi I: The Early Days*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 414, op. cit., 29.

[40] Gandhi is said to have observed that the Rowlatt Acts are the symptoms of a deep-seated disease and an open challenge that Indians must not succumb to if they desired to prove their "capacity for resistance to arbitrary or tyrannical rule…" See Ravinder Kumar, "The Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy, the Rowlatt Satyagraha and the Character of the Nationalist Struggle in India: Some Reflections," in V.N. Datta and S. Settar, eds., *Jallianwala Bagh Massacre* (Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 2000), 20.

[41] *Mahatma Gandhi I: The Early Days*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 414, op. cit., 29.

> to punish the people. Under his orders sepoys fired on an unarmed crowd and killed more than a thousand* people and wounded more than three thousand.[42]

These three panels are carefully sequenced so that a visual association is made between the *hartal*, Gandhi, and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Other visual choices could have been made – for instance, in the second panel a more dynamic image of one of the violent outbursts discussed in the text could have been shown, in place of the rather static image of Gandhi in thought. But by depicting Gandhi in this way, he is connected with the massacre – perhaps even responsible for it – despite the fact that he was not present in the Punjab when it occurred. As Joanna Williams has demonstrated, images in mixed-media can be sequenced so as to make a point of similarity, contrast, or other connection that images can often convey more subtly than words.[43] Here the text tip-toes around the issue of Gandhi's culpability, carefully avoiding the outright assertion that he is responsible for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, but the images are far more direct in making this cause-effect association.

The *Mahatma Gandhi I* comic book next details the atrocities that were committed by the British during the period of martial law that was imposed following the Jallianwala Bagh massacre: compulsory roll call, public floggings, a crawling lane, air bombardments, and arbitrary arrests. Gandhi, we are told, was not allowed to go to the Punjab for several months. But when he was finally allowed to visit Amritsar, large crowds welcomed him, and – the final panel informs us – he was then established as a "leader of the nation." Gandhi, it would seem, could not have become a national figure without the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, an event that spurred Indians across the

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[42] *Mahatma Gandhi I: The Early Days*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 414, ibid., 30. The asterisk in the text is noted at the bottom of p. 30 and states: "* The British gave the figures as 379 killed and over 1,200 wounded."

[43] Joanna Williams, *The Two-Headed Deer: Illustrations of the Ramayana in Orissa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), esp. pp. 117-123.

subcontinent to band together in order to protest the oppression of British rule. Yet, the comic also suggests in a more subtle fashion that the massacre would not have occurred at all, were it not for Gandhi's "Himalayan miscalculation."

THE JALLIANWALA BAGH MASSACRE: A 'TURNING POINT'

Although the *Mahatma Gandhi I* comic book was not published until 1989, the figure of Gandhi is present throughout the *Amar Chitra Katha* corpus, especially in connection with the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. In the *Bhagat Singh* issue (no. 234, 1981), for instance, the hero Bhagat Singh, a mere twelve-year-old boy at the time that the Rowlatt Acts were proposed, is inspired by the protest over these bills and the events that unfold thereafter. In one panel we are told, "Under the leadership of Gandhiji, people throughout the country protested against the Rowlatt Act with demonstrations and meetings."[44] The image in this panel, however, does not send the same message that the text does: it does not just depict a protest in which people march, chant refrains, hold signs, and wave flags – instead it builds upon these visual elements of protest, transforming it into a very violent scene by adding British police, armed with *lathis* (sticks), who beat the protestors. The combination of text and image in this panel work together to highlight the "problem" with Gandhi's non-violent philosophy: that non-violence is only rewarded with violence.

This is made clearer in the very next panel **[Fig. 6.9]**. The narrative text of this panel says, "At one such meeting held at Jallianwalla Bagh [sic], in Amritsar---"[45] and the image shows British soldiers firing rifles and handguns into a heap of dying and fleeing Indians. Here the incompleteness of the text forces the reader to look to the image in order to conclude the sentence, a technique that heightens the effect of this panel

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[44] *Bhagat Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 234 (Bombay: India Book House, 1981), 5.
[45] *Bhagat Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 234, ibid., 6.

by causing the reader to pause and reflect upon it.[46] Following the previous panel, this one builds upon the suggestion that peaceful meetings – the kind organized by Gandhi – only lead to violent persecution.

For Bhagat Singh, Jallianwala Bagh is a holy place, a place that has been "anointed with the blood of patriots"[47] and therefore becomes a pilgrimage point. When he visits the site, Bhagat Singh collects some of the soil, and takes it home with him so that it may inspire him to "sacrifice everything for the cause."[48] Jallianwala Bagh is clearly a central node in the history of colonial India as it is told in these comic books; the *Bhagat Singh* issue goes on to tell us that it was this massacre that "stirred the conscience of the nation" and caused Gandhi to launch the non-cooperation movement.[49] Rajinder Singh Raj, co-author of the *Bhagat Singh* issue, explained to me that the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was so important because it united not only Hindus and Muslims together in opposition to the British, but Sikhs as well:

> Well, it was important for India – it is after the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in 1919 that many Indians began to recognize the need for independence, for an active movement to escape the British yoke. And it is important for my people – for Sikhs – also. Twenty years after Jallianwala Bagh, Shaheed Udham Singh took revenge for that massacre by shooting O'Dwyer.[50]

Hence aside from the issue of national unity across multiple religious creeds, Jallianwala Bagh is clearly also important because it can be used to suggest the ultimate failure of the non-violent approach to the struggle for independence, and the need for a more "active movement." The revolutionary Udham Singh (1899-1940) was present at the

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[46] David Morgan has discussed similar text-image techniques found in Christian Sunday School literature in America, arguing that children are taught how to read text with image so as to ensure that they obtain the proper (the only) moral reading. See his *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 124-151.

[47] *Bhagat Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 234, op. cit., 6.

[48] *Bhagat Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 234, ibid., 7.

[49] *Bhagat Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 234, ibid.

[50] Rajinder Singh Raj, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 6, 2002.

Jalliamwala Bagh massacre, and took his own revenge for it in London on March 13, 1940, when he shot Sir Michael O'Dwyer, who had been the Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab at the time of the massacre. Udham Singh was hanged for his act on July 31, 1940, but has been immortalized by both Sikhs and non-Sikhs as a martyr who was indeed ready to sacrifice everything for the cause.[51]

Other incidents in the *Bhagat Singh* issue reinforce the idea that the goal of independence could not have been attained by non-violent means alone. In 1928, Bhagat Singh and other members of the Nav Jawan Bharat Sabha decided to join Lala Lajpat Rai's non-violent procession in protest against the Simon Commission. The procession was met with a police lathi charge, however, and Lala Lajpat Rai himself suffered severe injuries and passed away several days later. Bhagat Singh and his friend drive the moral home in one panel: "Lalaji's non-violence was rewarded with fatal blows," says the friend, to which Bhagat Singh responds, "This government understands only one language – blood for blood."[52] With the lesson of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and Lala Lajpat Rai's death fresh in his memory, Bhagat Singh chose a path other than that of non-violence. The following year, on April 8, 1929, Bhagat Singh and a friend, Batukeshwar Dutt, threw a homemade bomb into the Legislative Assembly. In the trial that followed, according to the comic book, Bhagat Singh contrasted his act with that of General Dyer:

> General Dyer killed hundreds of persons in Jallianwala Bagh. He was given lakhs of rupees as a reward by his countrymen… In contrast, we throw a weak bomb ensuring that no one is hurt. We are tried and given a life sentence… Our motive was not to kill, but to make our ideals heard and accepted.[53]

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[51] On the significance of Jallianwala Bagh in the Sikh Punjabi community, see Mohinder Singh, "Jallianwala Bagh and Changing Perceptions of the Sikh Past," in Datta and Settar, eds., *Jallianwala Bagh Massacre*, op. cit., 99-113.

[52] *Bhagat Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 234, op. cit., 17.

[53] *Bhagat Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 234, ibid., 25.

It is this act that Bhagat Singh is most celebrated for to this day. The cover of the comic book features Bhagat Singh and his companion throwing this very bomb, while the introduction provides an apologetic defense of his action:

> Bhagat Singh and his comrades were not blood-thirsty, trigger-happy terrorists. They were waging a war against a relentless colonial power. The odds were heavily against them. They were just a handful of selfless patriots and they had dared to take on the mighty British power…[54]

Several other comic book issues invoke Mahatma Gandhi in connection with the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in a way that is very similar to that seen already in the *Rabindranath Tagore* and the *Bhagat Singh* issues. The *Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das* issue (no. 344, 1985), for instance, features Chittaranjan Das addressing crowds in the manner of Gandhi, whom he admired, and then immediately thereafter discusses the aftermath of the passage of the Rowlatt Bill, depicting crowds being lathi-charged, imprisoned, and "showered with bullets as in the shameful, mindless massacre of innocents ordered by General Dyer at Jallianwala Baugh [sic] in 1919."[55] Similarly, in the *March to Freedom 3: The Saga of Indian Revolutionaries* issue (no. 360, 1986), Gandhi is again connected with the massacre in a sequence of panels that proceeds from peaceful crowds protesting the Rowlatt Acts under Gandhi's leadership, to General Dyer and his troops opening fire upon one such peaceful meeting in Jallianwala Bagh, to a close-up image (without text) of one man fleeing in terror and another falling over as a bullet strikes him.[56] Finally, in the more recent *The Story of the Freedom Struggle* (Bumper Issue No. 10, 1997), which was released on the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence, the same sequence of three panels from the *Mahatma Gandhi I* issue –

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[54] *Bhagat Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 234, ibid., inside front cover.
[55] *Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 344 (Bombay: India Book House, 1985), 14.
[56] *March to Freedom 3: The Saga of Indian Revolutionaries*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 360 (Bombay: India Book House, 1986), 21.

featuring the *hartal*, Gandhi in thought, and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre – is reprinted.[57]

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre was even deemed a significant enough event in the history of modern India that it was given its own comic book issue, *Jallianwalla Bagh* (no. 358, 1986), despite the fact that this broke with the usual comic book formula which centered the narrative around one person, written as a hero, and not on an event. The cover of this issue **[Fig. 6.10]** again features the scene of the massacre, with General Dyer in the foreground, his hand raised, frozen in the gesture commanding his troops to fire. In the background the Indian crowd panics and flees as bullets erupt. The introduction to this issue spells out the significance of this event:

> The sacrifice of the martyrs of Jallianwalla Bagh [sic] resulted in further intensification of the struggle for independence. It turned millions of loyal supporters of the British Raj into nationalists. The Jallianwalla Bagh massacre thus became an important landmark in India's struggle for freedom.[58]

This issue opens with a debate about the significance of the Rowlatt Acts among the people of Amritsar. One man says, "But who cares? It has nothing to do with me." A second man responds, "You are wrong brother," and then goes on to explain, "Gandhiji says the Rowlatt Act is a symbol of national humiliation!" At this point the narrator's voice chimes in, stating: "People in Amritsar as in other parts of India looked to Gandhiji for guidance."[59] As the story unfolds, Gandhi is not visually depicted in any of the panels, although his name and his message of non-violence are repeatedly invoked in the text. Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal, both prominent citizens of Amritsar who organized protest meetings, are described as Gandhians and are depicted teaching their

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[57] *The Story of the Freedom Struggle*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, bumper issue no. 10 (Bombay: India Book House, 1997), 50. Note that the cover of this issue features these four images (clockwise, starting with the top left): General Dyer giving the order to fire at Jallianwala Bagh; Subhas Chandra Bose at attention in front of the Indian flag; Gandhi on the salt march; and Lokamanya Tilak in court. See Fig. 1.8.

[58] *Jallianwalla Bagh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 358 (Bombay: India Book House, 1986), inside front cover.

[59] *Jallianwalla Bagh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 358, ibid., 1.

fellow citizens about Gandhi's message of non-violence and his call for a *hartal*.[60] The comic book recounts in great detail the incidents from April 6, the day of the *hartal*, to April 13, the day of the massacre, and then describes the British and Indian inquiry committees that were set up afterwards to investigate the massacre. One of the final panels mentions the "non-official enquiry committee, of which Gandhiji was an important member," and cites the committee's conclusion: "The Jallianwalla [sic] massacre was a calculated piece of inhumanity towards innocent and unarmed men, including children and unparalleled in its ferocity in the history of modern British administration."[61]

By framing the story of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre with textual references to Gandhi, the textual narrative again provides the visual narrative with a level of meaning that it would not likely have had otherwise, associating the massacre with Mahatma Gandhi, a figure who is not visibly present in the entire *Jallianwalla Bagh* comic book. Moreover, this association again highlights the "problem" with Gandhi's non-violent philosophy – that non-violence on the part of Indians is only rewarded with violence on the part of the British – and thereby suggests the crucial need for an alternate path towards independence.

It is this propensity for an alternate path towards independence – accompanied by a measurable degree of disdain for the non-violent path that was so well popularized by Gandhi – that is, I suggest, part of the surplus of ideological information that causes such an excess of text in the *Mahatma Gandhi I* issue. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre forms the climax of the *Mahatma Gandhi I* comic book: the *hartal* and the massacre are discussed for nine panels at the end of the comic book, and are ultimately followed by a

[60] *Jallianwalla Bagh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 358, ibid., 2-3.
[61] *Jallianwalla Bagh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 358, ibid., 31.

final panel depicting the 1919 Congress session at Amritsar, where Gandhi became an acknowledged "leader of the nation." And the massacre is the first thing mentioned in the rarely reprinted *Mahatma Gandhi II: The Father of the Nation* (no. 416, 1989) comic book issue:

> The terrible massacre at Jallianwala Bagh on April 13, 1919, sent shock waves throughout the country. Gandhi was allowed to go to Punjab in October. He met many people and talked with them and heard of the cruelties they had suffered. Still he continued to trust the British. But it took him only a few months more to realise that neither the British in India nor the Whitehall had repented of the atrocities perpetrated by General Dyer… Losing his faith of many years in the British people's sense of justice, Gandhi now turned a determined rebel against British rule in India. He called it 'Satanic' and asked Hindus and Muslims to unite against it and not co-operate with it in any way.[62]

Here again a significant amount of text is needed in order to link Mahatma Gandhi to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, for Gandhi cannot be visibly depicted at this event – hence the accompanying image in this panel is a close-up portrait of Gandhi that is devoid of any identifiable background.

Gandhi cannot be depicted at the massacre because he was in Bombay for the *hartal* on April 6, and planned to leave the evening of the next day for a brief visit to Delhi, after which he intended to go to Amritsar at the invitation of Drs. Satyapal and Kitchlew, whom he was "altogether unacquainted with at the time."[63] While en route, however, he was taken into police custody at the Palwal railway station and told that he was prohibited from entering the Punjab. Gandhi's growing popularity in the Punjab and the overwhelming response there to his call for a *hartal* alarmed British officials who

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[62] *Mahatma Gandhi II: The Father of the Nation*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 416 (Bombay: India Book House, 1989), 1. This passage is cited from the English edition of the comic, which I was unable to purchase, but did examine in the IBH library. I did purchase a Hindi edition of the comic (published in 1994) in Rajasthan in 1999. During 2001-2, I was unable to find either English or Hindi editions of this issue for sale in India. The sparse number of reprints of this particular issue, and the fact that it was never released in a deluxe edition format, may be another indicator of the ambiguity surrounding Gandhi's status as a leader of the nation.

[63] Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (New York: Dover Publications, 1983 [1948]), 416.

feared the possibility of rebellion. Hence Gandhi was escorted back to Bombay by the police, and was not allowed to enter the Punjab for over six months. Thus prior to the massacre, Gandhi had never been to Amritsar and had never met with the local "Gandhian" leaders there, nor had he helped to organize any *satyagraha* (civil disobedience) organizations or rallies there. In fact, Gandhi explicitly denied not only all connections with the protest leaders in Amritsar, but also all charges of culpability for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre that were levied against him by British officials, including Sir Michael O'Dwyer. O'Dwyer blamed Gandhi for the violent outbursts in the region, alleging that Gandhi and his co-conspirators (including the Afghans and Northwestern frontier tribes) were planning to overthrow British rule.[64] O'Dwyer also blamed Gandhi for failing to grasp that the common people of the Punjab were incapable of understanding the idea of non-violent resistance.[65] Gandhi, in turn, blamed O'Dwyer for the outbreak of violence in the Punjab:

> But the restraining influence of *Satyagraha* proved unequal to the strain put upon it by the Punjab Government. Had Sir M. O'Dwyer recognised the sobering effect of *Satyagraha* and co-operated with the people, as did the Governments of the other provinces in a more or less perfect manner, the terrible sufferings of the Punjab would have been avoided, and the history of the past few months would have been differently written.[66]

Although Gandhi did admit that it was a "Himalayan miscalculation" to call upon the people to join the civil disobedience movement without first teaching them to thoroughly understand the deeper implications of that movement, he by no means felt that his call for

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[64] See Michael O'Dwyer, *India as I Knew It, 1885-1925* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988 [1925]).

[65] J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga, "The Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy: The Official Attitude and its Significance," in Datta and Settar, eds., *Jallianwala Bagh Massacre*, op. cit., 120-121.

[66] This is the conclusion reached in the "Report of the Commissioners Appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress (1920)," reprinted as *Punjab Disturbances 1919-20, Volume I: Indian Perspective*, (New Delhi: Deep Publications, 1976), 42. Gandhi was a prominent member of this committee; the other members were: C.R. Das, Abbas S. Tayabji, and M.R. Jayakar; K. Santanam was Secretary; Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Pandit Motilal Nehru were Additional Members. See also J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga, "The Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy: The Official Attitude and its Significance," in Datta and Settar, eds., *Jallianwala Bagh Massacre*, op. cit., 123.

a non-violent protest against the Rowlatt Acts was the cause of violence.[67] On the contrary, Gandhi argued that his call for a general *hartal* and for non-violent resistance was "neither the cause nor the occasion of the upheaval," stating: "But for satyagraha, India would have witnessed scenes perhaps more terrible than it has passed through."[68] The members of the inquiry committee appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress to look into the Punjab disturbances unanimously agreed in the conclusion of their report that

> The *Satyagraha* movement, and the *hartal* which was designed as a precursor of it, whilst they vitalised the whole country into activity, saved it from more awful and more widespread calamities, by restraining the violent tendencies and passions of the people.[69]

Why, then, should the Jallianwala Bagh massacre be connected with Gandhi in such a cause-effect fashion in *Mahatma Gandhi I, Mahatma Gandhi II*, and other comic books? Why work so hard to make this connection, to share the blame for the massacre between both Gandhi and the colonial regime, when Gandhi himself explicitly denied this cause-effect connection? Why not just rest the blame squarely upon the shoulders of the British?

In his study of the Chauri Chaura riot of February 4, 1922, Shahid Amin has detailed how nationalist historiography has scripted Indian nationalism as "a massive undoing of Colonial Wrongs by a non-violent and disciplined people."[70] In this process, he argues, a selective national amnesia has been applied to events that inconvenience this story – events like the Chauri Chaura riot, in which a crowd of peasants burned down a

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[67] Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Autobiography*, op. cit., 424-425.
[68] Cited by S.R. Singh, "Gandhi and the Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy: A Turning Point in the Indian National Movement," in Datta and Settar, eds., *Jallianwala Bagh Massacre*, op. cit., 200.
[69] "Report of the Commissioners Appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress (1920)," op. cit., 158.
[70] Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 2-3.

police station, killing twenty-three policemen while chanting that "Gandhi's swaraj" had come. Amin demonstrates how this event was initially largely forgotten in nationalist lore, overlooked as an aberration, but was later re-scripted as an event of nationalist violence that was "justified, forgiven and made to seem normal by an inflated rhetoric of heroism within the description."[71] Only after it was rewritten in this way, he says, could Chauri Chaura be incorporated within the master story of the "Great Freedom Struggle."

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre, on the other hand, fit far more easily into the story of the "Great Freedom Struggle": If Chauri Chaura was the aberration (in which Indians killed non-violent British officers in a violent outburst), then Jallianwala Bagh was the norm (in which British officers killed non-violent Indians in a violent outburst). According to Krishna Kumar, an expert on Indian school histories of the freedom struggle, "No other incident in the history of British colonial domination presents the same mixture of callous tyranny and victimization that the Jallianwallah [sic] massacre does."[72] Jallianwala Bagh was immediately heralded as the "Colonial Wrong" par excellence. As reported in the *Jallianwalla Bagh* comic, the inquiry committee appointed by the Indian National Congress concluded in 1920: "The Jalleanwalla Bagh [sic] massacre was a calculated piece of inhumanity towards utterly innocent and unarmed men, including children, and unparalleled in its ferocity in the history of modern British administration."[73] Furthermore, the massacre and the punishments of the following martial law period were deemed to be "symptomatic of the moral degradation of their inventors."[74] By 1926, a lantern slide show on the massacre was being used by swadeshi

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[71] Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory*, ibid., 54-55.
[72] Krishna Kumar, *Prejudice and Pride: School Histories of the Freedom Struggle in India and Pakistan* (New Delhi: Viking by Penguin Books, 2001), 127.
[73] "Report of the Commissioners Appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress (1920)," op. cit., 158.
[74] "Report of the Commissioners Appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress (1920)," ibid., 159.

workers to demonstrate to Indians everywhere that "Indians were bound together because of their vulnerability to an illegitimate, foreign regime."[75] Discussing the way in which Indians looked upon the massacre as the product of the entire colonial system – not of one individual – Savita Narain writes:

> They did not see it as a singular event but as a consequence of the system of British rule in India… Gandhi summarised the general Indian view when he said 'We do not want to punish Dyer. We have no desire for revenge. We want to change the system that produced Dyer.'[76]

The British, on the other hand, treated the massacre as a singular event that was the product of one misguided individual: General Dyer. Winston Churchill called the Jallianwala Bagh massacre "an episode… without precedent or parallel in the modern history of the British Empire… an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation."[77] Derek Sayer has pointed out how this treatment of the event marginalizes it: "There has been no need felt to agonize over Amritsar as in any sense a national shame because it is aberrant, in a category by itself, not a part of the national history at all."[78] The parliamentary and public debates in Britain about the massacre quickly became debates about the guilt or innocence of General Dyer: some explained the massacre away as Dyer's personal misjudgment; others heralded Dyer as the savior of the British in India, comparing the Punjab disturbances with the rebellion of 1857.[79] The majority and minority reports of the

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[75] Lisa N. Trivedi, "Visually Mapping the 'Nation': Swadeshi Politics in Nationalist India, 1920-1930," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 62, no. 1 (Feb. 2003), 28-29.

[76] Savita Narain, *The Historiography of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, 1919* (Surrey: Spantech and Lancer, 1998), 38.

[77] Cited by Derek Sayer, "British Reaction to the Amritsar Massacre 1919-1920," *Past and Present* (No. 131, May 1991), 131.

[78] Derek Sayer, "British Reaction to the Amritsar Massacre," ibid., 132.

[79] The House of Commons debated Dyer's case on July 8, 1920, and the House of Lords on July 22, 1920. Editorials on the subject appeared frequently in the newspapers during these debates. Sayer discusses many of the newspaper editorials, as well as the fund drive initiated by the *Post* on July 10, 1920, which raised over £26,000 for General Dyer. See Derek Sayer, "British Reaction to the Amritsar Massacre," ibid.

Disorders Inquiry Committee (or "Hunter Committee," presided over by Lord Hunter and appointed by the Government of India to investigate the disturbances in Punjab, Delhi, and Bombay) concluded that Dyer was to be blamed for the massacre:

> That Brigadier-General Dyer displayed honesty of purpose and unflinching adherence to his conception of duty cannot for a moment be questioned. But his conception of his duty in the circumstances in which he was placed was so fundamentally at variance with that which His Majesty's Government have a right to expect from and a duty to enforce upon officers who hold His Majesty's commission, that it is impossible to regard him as fitted to remain entrusted with the responsibilities which his rank and position impose upon him.[80]

By writing off the Jallianwala Bagh massacre as a singular event caused by one misguided person, the massacre is erased from British history – much as the Chauri Chaura riot was erased from Indian history.[81]

In Indian history, however, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre continues to be remembered. The Indian members who made up the minority branch of the Disorders Inquiry Committee concluded:

> General Dyer wanted by his action at the Jallianwala Bagh to create a 'wide impression' and 'a great moral effect.' We have no doubt that he did succeed in creating a very wide impression and a great moral effect, but of a character quite the opposite to the one he intended. The story of this indiscriminate killing of innocent people not engaged in committing any acts of violence but assembled in a meeting, has undoubtedly produced such a deep impression throughout the length and breadth of the country, so prejudicial to the British Government, that it would take a good deal and a long time to rub it out.[82]

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[80] "(Majority and Minority) Report of the Disorders Inquiry Committee (1920)," reprinted as *Punjab Disturbances 1919-20, Volume Two: British Perspective* (New Delhi: Deep Publications, 1976), xlvi-xlvii. Both the majority and the minority condemned the firing at Jallianwala Bagh. However, whereas the majority (Lord Hunter, Justice Rankin, General Barrow, W.F Rice, and Thomas Smith) felt that a state of rebellion existed in the Punjab that necessitated martial law, the minority (Sir C.H. Setalvad, Pandit Jagat Narayan, and Sahibzada Sultan Ahmed Khan) denied that a state of rebellion existed and saw the introduction of martial law as unnecessary. Furthermore, the minority was critical of Sir Michael O'Dwyer as well, but the majority commended him for his service to His Majesty's Government.

[81] This is true for British historical fiction as well, including E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966). A notable exception, however, is the film *Gandhi*, directed by Sir Richard Attenborough (RCA/Columbia TriStar Home Video, 1982), which depicts the Jallianwala Bagh massacre from the Indian perspective as a turning point in British-Indian relations.

[82] "(Minority) Report of the Disorders Inquiry Committee (1920)," ibid., 193.

Remembered as the "Colonial Wrong" par excellence, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre did indeed make a deep impression. Jawaharlal Nehru remarked in 1961 that the Jallianwala Bagh massacre marked "a turning point in Anglo-Indian relations,"[83] and Indian historians have made good use of this phrase, deeming Jallianwala Bagh the "turning point in India's struggle for freedom" and the "turning point in the history of the national movement in India."[84]

Like these other Indian sources, the *Jallianwalla Bagh* comic also views the massacre as a product of the colonial system – not just one misguided individual – calling it a "landmark" in India's freedom struggle:

> The incident which occurred at Jallianwalla Bagh [sic] on 13th April, 1919 will ever remain in the memory of all Indians as an eloquent symbol of British tyranny in India. The massacre of unarmed Indians, which left four hundred dead and twelve hundred wounded, aroused a universal surge of indignation against the British rulers… The Jallianwalla Bagh massacre thus became an important landmark in India's struggle for freedom.[85]

Amar Chitra Katha founder Anant Pai explained to me that the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was a "turning point" when I asked him why it was mentioned in so many of the comic books:

> After 1857 Queen Victoria gave her declaration, and the Rule of Law was established from that day. Including Rabindranath Tagore, many intellectuals felt that the Queen's rule was very good, that it was much better than the East India traders and mercenaries had been. So they worked with the West to improve society. Like Rammohan Roy and the abolition of sati. Rammohan Roy worked

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[83] Cited by V.N. Datta, "Preface" to Datta and Settar, eds., *Jallianwala Bagh Massacre*, op. cit., vii. In his autobiography, Nehru recalls riding on the same train with General Dyer, the "hero of Jallianwala Bagh," in 1919 after the latter had testified before the Hunter Committee. Nehru comments that he was shocked by Dyer's brash justification of the firing. See Jawaharlal Nehru, *Jawaharlal Nehru, An Autobiography* (London: The Bodley Head, 1958 [1936]), 43-44.

[84] See, for instance, V.N. Datta, "Perceptions of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre," in Datta and Settar, eds., op. cit., 1; S.R. Singh, "Gandhi and the Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy: A Turning Point," op. cit.; and Satya M. Rai, "The Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy: Its Impact on the Political Awakening and Thinking in India," in Gursharan Singh et al., eds., *Jallianwala Bagh Commemoration Volume* (Patiala: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 1994), 134.

[85] *Jallianwalla Bagh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 358, op. cit., inside front cover.

> with Bentick, you know? Many on the whole were happy about the Rule of Law. 1919 was the turning point. Even Tagore returned his knighthood after this, after Jallianwala Bagh. It was after this slaughter of innocents that Indians on all levels – the intellectuals and the masses – increasingly worked towards independence.[86]

Yet because the comic books – unlike most of the earlier Indian sources[87] – seem to divide the culpability for the massacre between Gandhi and the British, I next asked Mr. Pai whether, in his opinion, Gandhi was in any way responsible for Jallianwala Bagh. He replied, grinning, "Oh, I can't say he was responsible for Jallianwala Bagh. You see, we can't say anything like that about Gandhiji! But like Subhas Chandra Bose said, when the ruler is so oppressive how can we stick to non-violence?"[88]

Others involved in the production of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics were more forthcoming about the relationship between Gandhi and Jallianwala Bagh. Former author and associate editor Subba Rao stated that in writing the *March to Freedom* series (nos. 348, 1986; 356, 1986; 360, 1986) he felt it was important to show how the armed struggle and the Gandhian movement were interwoven, one acting as a catalyst for the other. The Rowlatt Act, he stated, was a reaction to the armed struggle that had preceded it; Gandhi's non-cooperation movement was a reaction to the Rowlatt Act; and Jallianwala Bagh followed from the non-cooperation movement.[89] I next asked Mr. Rao if he would comment further on the relationship between Gandhi and Jallianwala Bagh:

> Jallianwala Bagh is a very important point in Indian history. It is when the change from the Gandhian to the revolutionary movement occurred. Jallianwala Bagh followed Gandhi's non-cooperation movement. But then after Jallianwala Bagh occurred, Gandhi left for twelve years. He was not sure that it was the right

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[86] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 26, 2002.

[87] In his autobiography, Gandhi does mention that "some irate young Punjabis" held him responsible for the massacre, which they felt would not have happened had Gandhi not suspended his call for *satyagraha*, and they even threatened to assassinate Gandhi if he entered the Punjab. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Autobiography*, op. cit., 429. The vast majority of Indians in the 1920s, however, did not hold Gandhi responsible for the massacre.

[88] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 26, 2002.

[89] Subba Rao, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 5, 2002.

> time for a non-cooperation movement, he had some doubts. And during these twelve years revolutionary activity arose. So you cannot understand the Freedom Struggle, the non-cooperation movement, or the revolutionary activity without understanding Jallianwala Bagh. In the *ACK*s we present a very balanced story, I believe. We looked at sources from both sides to write the Jallianwala Bagh issue.[90]

For this author, clearly, there is a cause-effect relationship between Gandhi, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and the revolutionary movement – a relationship that he has put much thought and effort into articulating for the comic book readers. Other authors spoke less in terms of a causal relationship and more in terms of an oppositional one between the proponents of Gandhi's non-violent path and the proponents of the revolutionary path – the "both sides" to which Mr. Rao made reference. Former author Yagya Sharma, who co-scripted the *Subhas Chandra Bose* issue, admitted that it was more fun to write issues about "heroes" like Subhas Chandra Bose than it was about "biographical figures" like Gandhi:

> Gandhi was afraid of turning India into a violent society. You need maturity to be able to see the valor in non-violent struggle. So the common man appreciates characters like Subhas [Chandra Bose] more. And storytellers appreciate Subhas more than Gandhi too. This is because you cannot dramatize inaction. How do you put inaction with pictures, involve the child as a reader? But characters who are active, they make better stories.[91]

Satyavrata Ghosh, a retired professor of political science and a revolutionary himself, worked as a consultant on several of the *Amar Chitra Katha* titles that featured revolutionaries. He was more outspoken about his desire to promote the heroes of the revolutionary or violent path, and stated that it was his goal to "publicize the revolutionaries, the 'other stream'," and not the "mainstream" – the Congress – which "in the name of so-called peace and non-violence shut out the contribution of those who

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[90] Subba Rao, ibid. Note: Gandhi actually suspended his non-cooperation movement in 1922 after the Chauri Chaura riot occurred, not after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre; this statement may reflect some of the collective amnesia discussed by Shahid Amin.

[91] Yagya Sharma, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 16, 2002.

advocated violence in the freedom struggle."[92] In an interview on All India Radio (AIR Bombay) on July 14, 1984, Professor Ghosh set forth his opinion on this subject in greater detail:

> [T]he contributions by the Open Wing of the Freedom Movement has been magnified beyond all proportions so much so that children read and repeat that 'Gandhiji gave us freedom'… [T]here have been broadly two streams in our freedom struggle – the more well-known one, somewhat over-publicised, of the open movement generally under the leadership of the Congress. There has also been the other stream, that of the revolutionary movement, much less known but no less potent as a contributing factor… [I]f one were to observe carefully, each dose [of freedom] came in the wake of some revolutionary activities. The benefits, however, always went to the other wing of the Movement.[93]

Here we find an open expression of the tension that exists in these comics between the two paths towards independence: the non-violent path advocated by Gandhi and the violent path of the revolutionaries. Such statements provide some insight into the connection between Gandhi and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre that is found in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic series. This connection serves two functions: First, it emphasizes the innocence of those who were killed by General Dyer in the massacre – the victims are repeatedly described as Gandhians who had embraced Gandhiji's message of non-violence – and thereby heightens the brutality of Dyer's act and, by extension, of the entire colonial regime. But the connection also serves a second function: it writes Gandhi as partly culpable for the massacre, and thereby discredits his philosophy of non-violent resistance.

Yet despite the sentiments of these producers, Gandhi is not directly criticized in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics. As Mr. Pai stated, such negative things can't be said

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[92] Prof. Satyavrata Ghosh, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 4, 2002.

[93] Interview with Prof. Satyavrata Ghosh on AIR (Bombay), July 14, 1984 (broadcast at 9:30 p.m. on the Bombay 'A' channel). This interview, the first part of a series titled "Profiles of Patriotism," is reprinted as "Appendix II" in Satyavrata Ghosh, *Indian Struggle for Freedom* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1988), 161-172; for the above citation see pp. 163-164.

about Gandhiji, a figure who is respected the world over and is still celebrated as the "Father of the Indian Nation." Criticism of Gandhi's philosophy can be found in many issues, but without any direct reference to Gandhi himself. The *Khudiram Bose* issue (no. 364, 1986), for instance, features the revolutionary Satyen Basu balling up his fist and proclaiming to a young Khudiram: "Prayer is not going to help us! Nor fasts! The only mantra that works is valour." The narrator then tells us that Satyen Basu, "like other revolutionaries, believed that the British rule could be ended only by resorting to arms."[94] Instead of direct criticism, it is the tension between text and image that conveys discomfort with Gandhi, and the attentive sequencing of panels that transfers to Gandhi's shoulders some of the blame for outbursts of colonial violence. The one exception that I am aware of to this rule of silence is the *Senapati Bapat* issue (no. 303, 1984). The introduction to this comic book about this freedom fighter from Maharashtra states:

> Though he believed in violence as a means to a noble end, he was not averse to peaceful methods but of course only if they worked. This was Senapati's greatest attribute – his catholicity of outlook and his openness of mind. He had the courage to criticise even Gandhiji if he thought him to be wrong, but the next moment, he would fast with the Mahatma if he considered the cause was good. The cause, not the man, was what mattered to Senapati – a high ideal he followed all through his life.[95]

Senapati Bapat (1880-1967) was a revolutionary who distributed manuals on the making of bombs among his colleagues. The British eventually arrested him, but could not prove a connection between Senapati Bapat and the production of bombs, and therefore set him free. It was at this point, the comic tells us, that Bapat "decided to try non-violent methods."[96] In protest against the proposed construction of the Mulshi dam, which would displace local farmers and peasants, he delivers speeches, tears up railroad tracks,

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[94] *Khudiram Bose, Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 364 (Bombay: India Book House, 1986), 5.
[95] *Senapati Bapat*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 303 (Bombay: India Book House, 1984), inside front cover.
[96] *Senapati Bapat*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 303, ibid., 23.

and even serves jail sentences. But when none of this meets with any success, Bapat decides to try other tactics **[Fig. 6.11]**: "But the struggle has to be kept alive – a violent struggle if need be!"[97] Accompanied by a close-up shot of Bapat in thought, wearing a "Gandhi cap" while making this radical decision, the narrative text tells us that Senapati Bapat "decided to use a dramatic method to draw the attention of the government" and others to the peasants' cause.[98] The next panel depicts this dramatic method in action: Bapat's men, armed with swords and lathis, await an approaching train. Bapat is featured in the foreground on the right half of the panel, a larger, more impressive figure than the locomotive that occupies the left side of the panel. Still wearing his Gandhi cap, he is now armed with a revolver and marches confidently towards the train – so confidently that the reader can have no doubt about who will be victorious in the impending showdown. Here there is no tension between text and image. These two interdependent panels use a combination of words and pictures that together demonstrate the power of the revolutionary path. Over the course of the next several panels, Bapat stops the train, shoots the train engineer in the leg, voluntarily proceeds to the police station to explain his act and turn himself in, and is sentenced to seven years in prison. More importantly, the final panels make it clear that Bapat's violent act succeeds in drawing a lot of media attention – thus demonstrating that violent means can at times prove far more useful than non-violent protest.

WHO SHOT THE MAHATMA?

Although Gandhi did not feel responsible for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and rejected any causal connection to the violence, his philosophy was nonetheless deeply affected by this tragic incident. Following the massacre, Gandhi decided that the ethics

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[97] *Senapati Bapat*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 303, ibid., 26.
[98] *Senapati Bapat*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 303, ibid.

of resistance must also be clearly reconciled with a theory of political obedience, and he therefore began extensive outreach work in order to educate the common people about the integral relationship between *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satyagraha* (civil disobedience). "*Ahimsa*, indeed, was the concept," says Partha Chatterjee, "which supplied Gandhism with a theory of *politics*, enabling it to become the ideology of a national political movement."[99] Throughout the remainder of 1919 and into 1920, Gandhi delivered speeches and wrote articles on the relationship between these two concepts, telling the people that to become true *satyagrahis* they must learn discipline and obey their political leaders, just as a soldier obeys his commander.[100] The masses, in other words, need not understand the goals or the decisions made, they need only be able to follow those decisions and be willing to risk their own lives in doing so. In this way, Chatterjee argues, Gandhi provided an ideological basis for the first time in Indian politics for the inclusion of the masses within the political nation. Although this inclusion of the masses came at a hefty price – they had to be willing participants in a struggle "wholly conceived of and directed by others"[101] – Gandhi nevertheless grew ever more popular among the masses during this period. But the Chauri Chaura riot of 1922 demonstrated that the "Mahatma of the peasants was not as he really was but as they had thought him up" and that the Mahatma's message was interpreted differently by the peasants than he intended it to be.[102] Gandhi therefore decided to call off his non-

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[99] Partha Chatterjee, "The Moment of Manoeuvre: Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society," in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995 [1986]), 107.

[100] See Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, "Gandhian Nationalism and Mass Politics in the 1920s," in *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 138; Partha Chatterjee, "The Moment of Manoeuvre," op. cit., 107-108.

[101] Partha Chatterjee, "The Moment of Manoeuvre," ibid., 124.

[102] Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory*, op. cit., 173-174; Partha Chatterjee, "The Moment of Manoeuvre," op. cit., 125. For a discussion of how Gandhi's call for a nationwide *satyagraha* movement drew forth a "rather un-Gandhian response" that was based on various local grievances, see R. Kumar, ed., *Essays on Gandhian Politics: The Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971);

cooperation movement, stating that "there is not yet in India that truthful and non-violent atmosphere which and which alone can justify mass disobedience."[103]

Gandhi did not launch his second all-India non-cooperation movement until 1930. In the intervening eight years, however, revolutionary forces grew considerably. In his speeches, writings, and actions, Gandhi had criticized not only the British rule in India, but also the concept of modern civilization that was advocated by the Indian intelligentsia. Partha Chatterjee has argued that in rejecting the economic, cultural, and political structures of civil society, and instead advocating a return to the simple self-sufficiency of "traditional" village life, Gandhi's ideology "operated from a standpoint that lay entirely outside the thematic of post-Enlightenment thought, and hence of nationalist thought as well."[104] Indeed, as Chatterjee points out, the difference between Gandhi's ideology and that of contemporary nationalist reformers can be seen in their widely varying approaches to the Hindu epics. Whereas Lokamanya Tilak and other nationalist leaders argued that the *Bhagavad Gītā* was a historical narrative and cited this scripture as moral justification for the commission of violent acts, Gandhi argued that the *Gītā* was neither a historical text nor could it be interpreted as justifying physical warfare. Rather, he argued, the physical warfare in the *Gītā* was a "poetic truth," an allegory for "the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind."[105] Far from the reformers who reinterpreted traditional scriptures and customs in light of modern conventions, Gandhi was instead "a counter-reformist, a revivalist, and a committed traditionalist."[106]

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see also the review essay by Ranajit Guha, "The Mahatma and the Mob," *South Asia*, no. 3 (August 1973), 107-111.

[103] Cited by Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory*, op. cit., 47.

[104] Partha Chatterjee, "The Moment of Manoeuvre," op. cit., 100.

[105] Cited in Partha Chatterjee, "The Moment of Manoeuvre," ibid., 94-95.

[106] Ashis Nandy, "Final Encounter: The Politics of the Assassination of Gandhi," in *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), 75.

Thus many Indian reformers began to perceive Gandhi and his growing popularity as a threat. According to Ashis Nandy, two elements of the Gandhian political philosophy were particularly dangerous to the traditional authority system: First, his attempt to change the definitions of center and periphery in Indian society by rejecting the role of the modernist, westernized, middle-class intelligentsia as a vanguard to the proletariat. Second, his negation of the concepts of masculinity and femininity implicit in some Indian traditions and in the colonial situation through his rediscovery of womanhood as a civilizing force in human society.[107] In the late 1920s, these reformers began to call for complete independence (*purna swaraj*), opposing Gandhi's call for moderation. Gandhi did eventually concede, accepting complete independence as the goal in 1929, but by that time urban youth and industrial workers were already beginning to identify with more radical organizations, including the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh.[108]

Nathuram Vinayak Godse (1912-49) was one such urban youth. A Chitpavan Brahman from Pune, Godse was a member of the Maharashtrian Brahmanic intelligentsia that tended to advocate a staunch anti-British, pro-Hindu form of nationalism.[109] In the late 1920s Godse participated briefly in Gandhi's civil disobedience movement, but soon found the ideology of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) more appealing. Like other reformers of the time, Godse too disagreed with Gandhi's non-violent interpretation of the *Gītā*, and argued that it was a historical

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[107] Ashis Nandy, "Final Encounter," ibid., 71-73.

[108] Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, "Gandhian Nationalism and Mass Politics in the 1920s," op. cit., 145.

[109] Ashis Nandy argues that by his cultural inheritance as a Chitpavan Brahman from an orthodox Hindu city in Maharashtra, Godse was naturally a potential opponent of Gandhi. He further points out that all of the known unsuccessful attempts to kill Gandhi occurred in Maharashtra. Nandy, "Final Encounter," op. cit., 77. For biographical information on Godse, see Manohar Malgonkar, *The Men Who Killed Gandhi* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1978).

narrative that should be understood literally, not allegorically.[110] Over the years, Godse became increasingly outspoken about his disagreements with Gandhi's philosophy. He used his newspaper *Hindu Rashtra*, for instance, to articulate how Gandhism was emasculating the Hindus and to urge Hindus to actively defend their nation rather than passively abide while it was harmed by the British and the Muslims.[111] The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 was the final straw. Blaming Gandhi for the partition, Godse and several conspirators began planning to assassinate Gandhi. On January 30, 1948, the assassination was carried out: Godse approached Gandhi while he was going to conduct his evening prayers at the Birla House where he was staying while in Delhi. Godse first bowed down before Gandhi, demonstrating his respect for the services that Gandhi had done for the nation, and then shot him three times in the chest. Godse then calmly called for the police and turned himself in.

An hour after the assassination, an AIR broadcast informed listeners across India of the shooting, saying only: "Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated in New Delhi at twenty past five this afternoon. His assassin was a Hindu." Immediately thereafter, anti-RSS and anti-Brahman riots broke out throughout the area of modern-day Maharashtra as people protested the killing of the Mahatma.[112] It would not be long, however, before Godse would begin to be hailed a hero in Maharashtra and beyond.

During his trial, Godse described his action as a duty that he had to perform for the sake of the nation:

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[110] See Ashis Nandy, "Final Encounter," ibid., 81. Godse also mentioned his interpretation of the *Gita* as condoning violence in his final letter to his parents, written from his jail cell in 1949.

[111] Ashis Nandy notes that Godse's writings were "punctuated by references to the British and Muslims as 'rapists', and Hindus as their raped, castrated, deflowered victims." Nandy, "Final Encounter," ibid., 86.

[112] For a detailed account of these riots, see Maureen Patterson, "The Shifting Fortunes of Chitpavan Brahmans: Focus on 1948," in D.W. Attwood, M. Israel, and N.K. Wagle, eds., *City, Countryside and Society in Maharashtra* (University of Toronto: Centre for South Asian Studies, 1988).

> Gandhiji failed in his duty as the Father of the Nation. He has proved to be the Father of Pakistan. It was for this reason that I as a dutiful son of Mother India thought it my duty to put an end to the life of the so-called Father of the Nation who had played a very prominent part in bringing about the vivisection of the country – our Motherland.[113]

This speech has come to be celebrated within some Hindu nationalist circles, and especially in Maharashtra, where it plays a significant role in the revisioning of the freedom struggle. Nathuram Godse's brother, Gopal Godse, has written several books about his brother's act. One of them, *May It Please Your Honour*, centers upon the speech given by Nathuram Godse as his defense plea at his trial. First published in 1977, this book came into the limelight in 1998 when a play based on it was staged in Bombay. The two-act play, entitled "Me Nathuram Godse Boltoy" ("This is Nathuram Godse Speaking"), enacts Godse's defense plea and thereby explores the assassination of Gandhi and the trial of Godse from Godse's point of view.

The author of "Me Nathuram Godse Boltoy," Pradeep Dalvi, stated that the play was not intended to glorify the assassination of Gandhi, but to simply "give Godse's views, as well as Gandhi's, a fair hearing."[114] However, audience members inside the theater are reported to have cheered when the actor playing Godse stated his reasons for killing the Mahatma, while hundreds of protestors outside the theater demanded the cancellation of the play which they felt denigrated Gandhi and glorified violence.[115] The controversial play was banned by the Government of Maharashtra in 1998, and the book that inspired it was banned the following year. In the past several years, however, these

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[113] Cited by Ashis Nandy, "Final Encounter," ibid., 83; see also Gopal Godse, *May It Please Your Honour: Statement of Nathuram Godse* (Pune: Vitasta Prakashan, 1977); and "Nathuram Godse: Why I Shot Gandhi," *Onlooker* (Nov. 16-30, 1978), 22-25.

[114] Ramola Talwar, "Protesters Clash with Police, Play's Performances Suspended," AP Story (Bombay: July 17, 1998). LexisNexis.

[115] Smruti Koppikar, "Mee Nathuram Godse Boltoy: Hype and Hysteria," *India Today* (July 27, 1998), 77; Swapan Dasgupta and Smruti Koppikar, "Nathuram Godse On Trial Again," *India Today* (Aug. 3, 1998), 22.

rulings have been overturned, and then the reversals overturned, and still the court battle wages on. Other expressions of appreciation of Godse and his infamous act – such as the yearly gathering in Pune on November 15, the anniversary of Godse's execution, when his followers perform *aarti* before his portrait and pray before the blood-spattered shirt that he wore when he assassinated Gandhi – have been as controversial as the play.[116]

Nathuram Godse, as his followers remember him, is in many ways the sort of character that is scripted as a hero in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books. Like the Maharashtrian revolutionary hero Senapati Bapat, Nathuram Godse too is remembered as an articulate and moral man who embraced the revolutionary path only after giving this decision much forethought – indeed, both Bapat and Godse tried Gandhi's non-violent approach first before rejecting it in favor of a violent one. Prior to his showdown with the locomotive, the *Senapati Bapat* comic tells us that Bapat informed the dam builders of his intentions; and after shooting the engineer in the leg, Bapat surrendered himself to the police and explained to them the reasons for his action, stressing that he had only injured the driver, not killed him.[117] Stories of Nathuram Godse's act as told by his followers similarly stress his efforts to minimize violence, by taking only what action was necessary in order to accomplish the goal and no more. For instance, in order to avoid injuring anyone other than Gandhi, Godse is said to have pushed Gandhi's grand-niece, Manu, aside before firing his gun. And like Bapat, Godse immediately surrendered himself to the police, and during his later trial eloquently explained the reasons for the assassination. Nathuram Godse, like Senapati Bapat and the other revolutionary figures featured in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books, is remembered by his followers as a

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[116] See Swapan Dasgupta and Smruti Koppikar, "Nathuram Godse On Trial Again," ibid. Also, the recent showing of painter Kunal Kishor's "cartoon-cum-poster" exhibition on Nathuram Godse in Patna on May 19, 2003 (in honor of Godse's birth anniversary) was quite controversial.

[117] *Senapati Bapat*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 303, op. cit., 27.

courageous, active, articulate, ethical man who is willing to take whatever action is necessary in order to save his nation.

Given, then, the controversial status of both Mahatma Gandhi and Nathuram Godse in modern India, how are the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics to deal with Gandhi's assassination? In order to retain their wide mass-market appeal, these comic books can neither depict Gandhi's assassin as a hero (no matter how closely his story resembles that of other revolutionary heroes), nor as an anti-hero. Instead, they must attempt to mediate between "both sides," to use Subba Rao's earlier words. In the *Mahatma Gandhi II* issue, the scene of Gandhi's death is depicted in just one panel **[Fig. 6.12]**. The text here is surprisingly brief, given the amount of excess verbiage throughout the rest of the issue: "But Gandhi's efforts to unite the people did not please everyone. At 5:10 p.m. on January 30, 1948---"[118] The accompanying image shows an alarmed crowd circling the assassin as he shoots Gandhi, who exclaims "He Ram!" as he falls. The assassin, Godse, is not the focus of the image – only his head and shoulders can be seen in the midst of the crowd, and he has no identifying marks (such as the cap that Godse wears in the most common photograph of him). Nor is Gandhi the focus, although he is easily distinguished. Rather, the literal focal point of this dramatic image is the gun, which is placed at the very center of the image and is encircled by a large yellow aura. It is the act here that is highlighted, not the actor or the recipient. Like the image, the text also does not focus on the actor: Godse's name is nowhere mentioned, and thus he neither needs to be exculpated nor blamed. The assassination is a mere statement of fact, and it is up to the reader to draw his/her own moral conclusions, to decide whether to mourn or

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[118] *Mahatma Gandhi II: The Father of the Nation*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 416, op. cit., 28. This passage is cited from the English edition of the comic book, which I was unable to purchase, but did examine in the IBH library. The image comes from a Hindi edition of the comic book (published in 1994) that I purchased in Rajasthan in 1999.

celebrate. Yet, because of this attempt to maintain objectivity, the ending of this comic book strikes me as a very unsatisfactory one for the loyal comic book reader, for it clearly deviates from the standard formula that we readers have come to expect, wherein the hero either emerges victorious in the end, or dies a noble death in battle with the anti-hero.

Another comic book, *G.D. Birla* (no. 382, 1987), also depicts the scene of Gandhi's death **[Fig. 6.13]**. In this panel, the disassociation between the act of killing Gandhi and the actor is even clearer, resulting in an even more disturbing effect. The text states: "The relationship between Gandhi and Birla was so close that Gandhi stayed at Birla House while in Delhi. Ironically it was here that he was murdered."[119] In the image, only two figures can be identified: Gandhi occupies the right side of the panel, and is beginning to bleed from the three bullets that have just lodged in his chest. Gandhi's grand-niece Manu is a smaller figure in the bottom center of the image, where she has fallen to the ground (presumably after being pushed aside by Godse). The assassin is not depicted. Instead, the assassin's gun occupies the entire left side of the image, and the perspective is such that the viewer watches the bullets leave the barrel and strike the Mahatma from nearly the same angle that the shooter would – an angle that subtly discourages the viewer from identifying with the recipient. Indeed, in a way that is reminiscent of many new video games, it is as if we readers are the assassin, looking down at our own hand just after pulling the trigger. Who shot the Mahatma? We did.

The assassination as it is depicted in Fig. 6.12 contains many more descriptive elements than Fig. 6.13. For instance, we read that it occurred at exactly 5:10 p.m. on the evening of January 30, 1948, and we see that Gandhi is in a well-manicured garden, and that he is surrounded by both loyal followers in "Gandhi caps" and a larger, amorphous crowd. In these descriptive details this image calls to mind other detailed visual

[119] *G.D. Birla*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 382 (Bombay: India Book House, 1987), 29.

renditions of the assassination, including the beginning and ending scenes of Richard Attenborough's 1982 film "Gandhi."[120] Whereas the reader remains a passive witness of the act here, Fig. 6.13 implicates the reader by minimizing descriptive details and inviting us to become active participants in the narrative action. Yet despite this significant difference between these two renderings of Gandhi's death, the message of these two panels is ultimately the same. In both, the compositional focal point is the gun. Furthermore, in each panel a yellow aura with lines radiating outward surrounds the gun and the bullets that pierce Gandhi's chest. In American comics such action lines (or "zip ribbons") are often used to indicate dynamic movement, to "depict action with drama," and as Scott McCloud points out, over time they have become "so stylized as to almost have a life and physical presence all their own!"[121] Here, in these two panels the action lines and the yellow aura do indeed convey dramatic action: they highlight the violent path of the bullets as they erupt from the gun and rip into Gandhi's chest, making the gun and bullets take on a life of their own, as the active subject of these images. In both panels, therefore, the focus is clearly upon the violent act of the assassination itself, not the recipient or the actor.

What is perhaps most startling about the panel in the *G.D. Birla* issue depicting the assassination of Gandhi is how disconnected it is with the rest of the storyline. Ghanshyam Das Birla (1894-1983) was a prominent industrialist and philanthropist, and was one of Gandhi's close followers. The comic is careful to point out the disagreements

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[120] *Gandhi*, directed by Sir Richard Attenborough, op. cit. The film begins with the assassination, alternating shots between Godse holding his gun and Gandhi falling, and ends by returning to the scene of the assassination and the following cremation. This film was in turn influenced by Henri Cartier-Bresson's photos of Gandhi just before his assassination and of the cremation of Gandhi. See Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Henri Cartier-Bresson in India* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, [1987] reprinted 2001); also Gerald Gold, *Gandhi, A Pictorial Biography* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1983); and R. Srivatsan, "Gandhi's Funeral: Event or Statement?" in *Conditions of Visibility: Writings on Photography in Contemporary India* (Calcutta: Stree, 2000), 107-121.

[121] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, op. cit., 111-112.

between Birla and Gandhi, devoting pages 27 and 28 to their differences over Gandhi's concept of cottage industries and Birla's belief in the need for large-scale industrialization. Page 29 then mentions that Gandhi's civil disobedience movement was gaining momentum on the top panel and shows Gandhi marching with many followers behind him; the second panel, on the bottom left, mentions that Gandhi represented the Indian National Congress at the Second Round Table Conference in 1931 while Birla was a representative of the Indian business community; and the third and final panel of this page, on the bottom right, depicts Gandhi's assassination. On the next page, page 30, the narrative returns to its proper subject, Birla, highlighting both his worldly position and his spiritual prowess.

Why is this image of the assassination even included in the *G.D. Birla* issue? The assassination of Gandhi is only tangentially related to the storyline, connected through the insertion of the narrative explanation that the assassination "ironically" happened at the Birla House. Yet placed as it is in the lower right corner at the very end of a two-page spread about Birla's relationship with Gandhi, this panel taints all of the previous panels on these two pages. Now the disagreements that Birla had with Gandhi over economic progress take on a more ambiguous quality. Are they harmless, merely friendly debates? Or are they more sinister, symptomatic of the increasing disapproval of Gandhi's ideology, even amidst his most loyal followers and friends? Although we readers are ultimately made to share the responsibility for Gandhi's death in the final panel of this spread through our position as the shooter, the text and image together implicate Birla as well. The "hero" of this particular issue, G.D. Birla, is nowhere to be seen in this last panel. In fact, all of Gandhi's followers – aside from his fallen grand-niece – have been pushed into the distant background, becoming mere spectators, faceless and nameless. Where are his loyal followers now, when they are most needed?

Similarly, the use of the word "ironically" in the narrative text also raises questions about Birla's loyalty, for this choice of wording points out that it was precisely where Gandhi should've been most safe – at his good friend Birla's house – that he was murdered. In these ways, whether intended by the author and artist or not, the inclusion of this panel on the assassination of Gandhi and the placement of it at the very end of this narrative sequence is quite unsettling.

The repetition of images of Gandhi's assassination in this comic book series, like the repetition of images of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, is significant, suggesting that the assassination too is a nodal point in the history of modern India – especially as that history is recounted by Anant Pai and other Hindu Brahmans in Maharashtra. The inclusion of this image in the *G.D. Birla* and *Mahatma Gandhi II* issues works – also like the images of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre – to again suggest the problem with Gandhi's non-violent philosophy: that non-violence is ultimately only rewarded with violence. Yet whereas the images of the massacre required an excess of text in order to "explain" them – to causally connect the massacre with both Gandhi and the British – the images of the assassination require the moderation of text in order to break the causal connection between Godse and the event. Eliminating the shooter's identity, of course, is one way of reducing the possibility of controversy. It is a way of demonstrating the ultimate irony of Gandhi's philosophy by remembering the act of his assassination without passing judgment on the actor either positively, by declaring him a revolutionary hero, or negatively, by declaring him a criminal. But it also is a form of collective amnesia, one that extends beyond these comic books and very seriously impacts how the life and death of Gandhi is remembered.

For instance, historian Krishna Kumar has discussed the passage on Gandhi's assassination in the NCERT textbook of modern Indian history for class eight, noting how confusing the passage is for its intended audience due to its recalcitrance. He writes:

> If a text were aimed at communicating to children the story and also the significance of Gandhiji's murder, it could not possibly avoid delving into the web of details about Hindu-Muslim conflict, the politics of partition and the politics of Hindu revivalist organizations, and Gandhiji's own frustration in the final months of his life. These details, howsoever briefly one might discuss them, are necessary for anyone who wishes to make sense of Gandhiji's assassination.[122]

Instead, the textbook – like the comic books – only mentions that "some people" did not like Gandhi's message of love and brotherhood, yet refuses to explain who those people are and what their motivations were, or, more specifically, to name Gandhi's assassin. Concluding his discussion of the textbook, Kumar argues that despite the authors' intention to teach history from a secular (or "received") perspective, such textbooks often end up furthering a communal (or "rival") perspective instead:

> The vague, incomplete knowledge we found in the NCERT textbook about an event of modern Indian history as major as Gandhiji's murder can be counted on to leave children all the more eager than they anyhow are to accept the "rival" perspective. In cruel brevity, the "rival" perspective blames Gandhiji for his own murder. It denies that his killer was a fanatic inspired by the institutionalized ideology of Hindu revivalism. It suggests that Gandhiji's disappearance from the political scene was not such a bad thing after all since he was lionising the Muslim community and Pakistan.[123]

I discuss Kumar's research at some length here because I too believe that these instances of collective amnesia, however well-intentioned to minimize communal conflict, can at times have the opposite effect. In fact, several of the college-age comic book readers

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[122] Krishna Kumar, *Learning from Conflict* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1996), 15.

[123] Krishna Kumar, *Learning from Conflict*, ibid., 17. On the controversy over the complete exclusion of the assassination of Gandhi in the most recent NCERT textbooks, see "Govt on the Mat over Textbooks," *The Times of India* (New Delhi: Nov. 27, 2002), 1.

with whom I spoke – both in India and in the diaspora – who were not already familiar with Nathuram Godse and his act, assumed that it was a Muslim who shot Gandhi.[124]

Significantly, these comic book panels depicting the assassination of Gandhi are a radical departure from the way in which the death of a hero is usually envisioned in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books. Author Yagya Sharma explained to me that a good script is one that contains the dramatic death of the hero, who must die fighting, as in the *Rana Pratap* (no. 24, 1971) or *Prithviraj Chauhan* (no. 25, 1971) issues:

> They are heroes because they stood up against a much larger power… they stood up against tremendous odds. Prithviraj Chauhan lost, but he fought bravely. This is what is important. And Rana Pratap, he did not meet his goal, but he did free Chittorgarh. So in a way he failed, because he didn't free all of Rajasthan, but he also fought to his last. This is what makes them role models.[125]

When I asked him whether or not this applied to more recent figures, such as freedom fighters like Khudiram Bose and Bhagat Singh who were executed, Mr. Sharma stated that it did, that they too sacrificed their lives fighting to the last against a much larger power. He noted that the *Subhas Chandra Bose* issue was particularly troublesome to script in this respect:

> Many people today believe that he [Subhas Chandra Bose] may still be alive. When the plane crashed, there was no physical evidence of his death. So after Independence many thought that perhaps he was still alive, waiting for the right time to return to India. Of course, this raises a lot of problems, a lot of questions. But the minute you go and say that he's dead there'll be an uproar. I mean, of course he died in the plane crash. But so many believed that he was still alive. And it is also part of storytelling, this ending. If we showed his death in the plane crash – well, that is just so undramatic for a hero. It is not at all like Rana Pratap fighting to his death. If Subhas Chandra Bose had died fighting, that would've been different. Storytelling needs a climax. What kind of a climax and resolution would it be if we just said, 'And then he died in a plane crash'?[126]

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[124] One college-age comic book reader in the U.S. further explained to me that this was the reason for much of the Hindu-Muslim strife in postcolonial India. Informant 4.1, group interview conducted by the author at The University of Texas at Austin, September 9, 2002.

[125] Yagya Sharma, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 16, 2002.

[126] Yagya Sharma, ibid.

The *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books have no end of praise for revolutionary figures like Khudiram Bose, Chandra Shekhar Azad, and Bhagat Singh who died fighting for freedom from the British. The comic books about these figures repeatedly pair references to their patriotism with textual and visual references to their manliness. The introduction to the *Chandra Shekhar Azad* issue, for instance, states:

> The activities of Azad and his associates contributed in no small measure to the awakening of the Indian masses – a task which the national leaders of the day were trying to achieve through a peaceful means. Azad had a strong physique, plenty of common sense and patriotic zeal. The British described him as a terrorist. But he considered himself a freedom fighter.[127]

Similarly, the final words of the *Bhagat Singh* issue are: "'The lesson which we should learn from Bhagat Singh is to die in a manly and bold manner so that India might live,' wrote Jawaharlal Nehru of this valiant young martyr."[128] Throughout these comic books, a connection is repeatedly made between manliness, patriotism, and the revolutionary path. The non-violent path, on the other hand, is associated with both a lack of manliness and a lack of patriotism, and it is Gandhi who was the most outspoken proponent of the non-violent path.

Thus the ultimate tragedy about the showing and telling of Gandhian politics in this comic book series is that Jallianwala Bagh is not the only massacre that is associated with Gandhi. Here, by causally connecting Gandhi with the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and by dwelling upon Gandhi's own violent death, the non-violent path is repeatedly shown to be untenable, to constantly meet with violence in the end, and therefore to be the path of a false prophet, a false hero, so to speak, for the "Father of the Nation" did not and would not die fighting for his country, but his assassin would and did. In this way, the death of Gandhi in these comics is not just the assassination of an individual. It is

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[127] *Chandra Shekhar Azad*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 142 (Bombay: India Book House, 1977), inside front cover.
[128] *Bhagat Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 234, op. cit., 30.

also the massacre of an ideal: the ideal of non-violence – of Hindu-Muslim unity – that the Mahatma stood for.

Chapter 7: Conclusion: Manufacturing Indianness

When Dr. Joshi, India's Union Human Resource Development Minister, presided over the release of the new *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book titled *Bhagawat: The Krishna Avatar* (not numbered, 2000) in August of 2000 and endorsed the use of these mythological and historical comic books in Indian schools in order to teach the future generation of Indian citizens the "country's rich heritage and culture,"[1] he endorsed not only the comic book medium as a pedagogical tool, but also the particular vision of "Indianness" that is constructed in this comic book series. As I have demonstrated in the preceding chapters, this concept of "Indianness" – which aligns with the hegemonic Hindu nationalist conception of Indian identity in that it entails the marginalization of Muslims and other religious and cultural "outsiders" from the national past, the recasting of women in so-called "traditional" roles, and the privileging of middle-class, upper-caste Hindu culture – does not just exist passively, but has instead been actively created amidst ongoing debate.

Through case studies of several mythological and historical comic books, we have seen how the artists, authors, and editors involved in the creative process have raised many questions about Indian identity during the production of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series. Some of the issues they have debated include: What is the place of science and faith in modern India and in an Indian comic book series? What cultural texts and other resources are considered "authentic" or legitimate to use in crafting Indian comic books? What is the place of women in Indian society, and what role models are available for Indian girls today? What roles have Muslims and other non-Hindus had in

[1] Discussed in the Introduction; also see "Future Generation Should Know Country's Heritage and Culture," *The Free Press Journal* (Mumbai: Aug. 24, 2000), 3.

Indian history and society? And which modern national leaders should be remembered as "heroes" of the struggle for India's independence?

Through these case studies we have also seen the limits of these debates. For instance, throughout the discussions about how to depict the Hindu deity Krishna and the debates over the appropriateness of miracles in a modern age that were ongoing during the making and the re-making of the very first issue, *Krishna* (no. 11, 1969), no one challenged the assumption that all Indian children needed to learn Krishna's story. And despite the new emphasis on "authenticity" during the production of *Tales of Durga* (no. 176, 1978), everyone agreed to the need to sanitize the goddess Kali in order to make her more appealing to modern middle-class Hindus. These issues demonstrate not only the centrality of Hinduism to this Indian comic book series, but also that it is a modern middle-class, predominantly Vaishnava strand of Hinduism. In the 1970s, when debates arose about the depiction of women and Muslims that resulted in an alternative, martial feminine ideal and in the portrayal of some Mughal emperors as "heroes," an emphasis was nonetheless maintained on the heroines' ultimate self-sacrifice and on the evils of Muslim orthodoxy. During the making of the *Shivaji* (no. 23, 1971) issue, we saw that care was taken to portray Shivaji as a hero that Brahmans and non-Brahmans could both look up to; yet artists, authors, and editors alike agreed to the depiction of him as a manly defender of Maharashtra and the larger Hindu nation. The portrayal of Gandhi in various comics in conjunction with references to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre likewise demonstrates the influence of a more militant form of Hindu nationalism, as well as regional and caste influences, in the presentation of this modern Indian icon.

In this concluding chapter, I want to discuss the consumption of these comic books in a bit more detail. I have already alluded to some of the debates that have arisen in the consumption process, such as journalist Nancy Adajania's criticism of the *Shivaji*

issue for its superhuman presentation of a historical figure, and the protest of the *Valmiki* issue (no. 46, 1973) by the low-caste Valmiki Sabha group for depicting their deity Valmiki as a dark-skinned dacoit.[2] But how does the target audience – middle-class Indian children – respond to these *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books? What do they like and dislike about them? What sorts of debates arise about Indian identity in this consumption process, and what are the limits of those debates? After considering what the study of the consumption and production of these comic books teaches us about the construction of Indian identities, I will also briefly reflect upon the place of Indian comic books in the larger public culture market in India and worldwide.

CONSUMING IMMORTAL PICTURE STORIES

As discussed in Chapter 1, Anant Pai founded the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series because he believed Indian children were in danger of forgetting their own heritage. The comic books are marketed directly to children, as well as to their parents and educators, and they are now regularly used in urban Indian English-medium schools as an alternative to school textbooks. For politicians like Dr. Joshi, these comic books are valuable pedagogical resources because they articulate the hegemonic narrative of "Indianness" that the state hopes to instill in its citizens. Furthermore, they articulate that narrative in a fun way, in a visual medium that children are drawn to. Educating children, of course, is not only about teaching them a love of reading or math or science; it is also about transforming them into good national subjects. Krishna Kumar, a Professor of Education, has discussed this function of educational systems:

> [S]ystems of education are oriented towards cultivating the characteristics of loyal citizens in children, in preference to the development of their intellectual or contemplative capacities. As far as teaching about the past is concerned, schools in different systems perform the job of socializing the young into an approved

[2] See Chapter 4.

> national past, the approving agency being the state. As an agency of secondary socialization – as distinguished from primary socialization accomplished in the family – the school uses the officially approved knowledge of the nation's past to inspire and prepare children for fulfilling the roles expected of them as obedient citizens.[3]

For Hindu nationalist politicians like Dr. Joshi who also seek to "Indianize, nationalize, and spiritualize" the school curriculum, this comic book series has a distinct advantage over school textbooks in its combination of historical and mythological themes.

How do readers respond to these comic books? Do they read them in school, or at home, or both? Which issues do they like, and which do they dislike? I interviewed dozens of former (now adult) *Amar Chitra Katha* fan club members in Mumbai and in the other urban centers that I visited (Pune, Delhi, Kolkata, and Chennai), as well as several smaller cities that I was able to travel to during the period of my field research (including Agra, Aurangabad, Bhubaneshwar, Lucknow, and Mamallapuram).[4] I communicated with approximately fifty other former fan club members through mail, questionnaire forms, and email. While in Mumbai, I also visited several college campuses to speak with groups of college-age students about their comic reading habits, and interviewed several school principals who use these comic books in the classroom and spoke with their students.

In the course of conducting this research, I learned of a variety of reasons for the consumption of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books. Comic books on the freedom struggle are assigned reading in many ninth standard classes in Mumbai and other cities, and students generally enjoy reading these comics as a break from their usual

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[3] Krishna Kumar, *Prejudice and Pride: School Histories of the Freedom Struggle in India and Pakistan* (New Delhi: Viking by Penguin Books, 2001), 20-21.

[4] I have focused on adults who read these comic books as children – rather than on children – due to the limits placed upon my research visa and by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin (I received permission to interview adults but did not have approval to conduct research involving human subjects who are children).

assignments. Many school libraries stock both mythological and historical issues, and when they do students regularly check them out, especially the mythological comic books, for pleasure reading. Parents purchase these comic books for their children, often viewing them as a better leisure-time alternative to video games and television because they enhance English-language reading skills, and with the additional hope that their children will learn something about the Indian past in the process of reading them. And many, many children – girls and boys equally – read these comics at home and in school because they enjoy seeing Indian stories rendered in the comic book format. These children share their comic books with siblings, friends, classmates, and neighbors; they often save up their allowance to buy issues; and even start up or join fan clubs.

Which titles were most popular with comic book readers? The titles that were cited again and again as the most beloved favorites were the epic issues, including anything to do with the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, or the *Bhagavad Gītā*. One fan commented that he enjoyed the *Mahābhārata*-themed comics so much because after reading them his trivia skills were enhanced: "Parallel to seeing it on TV, the stories from the Mahabharata were good to know. I actually could compete with my Grandmother in the story when watching the TV."[5] Another fan that ranked the various *Rāmāyaṇa*-related issues at the top of his favorites list noted, "Ramayana is not a mythology as British wanted Indians to believe. It is the real life sketch of God in the role of a king to show how to rule and live an honest life."[6] Again and again, fans commented that they like the epic issues best precisely because they in some way demonstrate what it means to be Indian. One fan, for instance, said that the epic issues are "small parts of the great Indian epics – Ramayan, Mahabharat, etc. I like the life story of a character and the morals to be

[5] Anonymous fan 7.1, interviewed by the author in Austin, Texas, October 17, 2002.
[6] Anonymous fan 7.2 (India), written correspondence with the author, October 19, 2002.

learnt from it. Apart from giving me good knowledge about my culture and heritage, they were made so easy to understand."[7] Putting it even more succinctly, a former fan club president who listed *Karna* (no. 26, 1972) and *Rama* (no. 15, 1970) among her top favorites said, "I love the [epic] ones. Only these have an essence of Indianness which is truly worth appreciating. It makes you feel proud about being an Indian."[8]

Other favorite categories were the humorous *Pañcatantra* series of issues featuring animal fables, including *Panchatantra: How the Jackal Ate the Elephant and Other Stories* (no. 163, 1978) and *Panchatantra: The Brahmin and the Goat and Other Stories* (no. 138, 1977); the *Jātaka* issues featuring different animals, such as *Jataka Tales: Jackal Stories* (no. 195, 1970) and *Jataka Tales: Elephant Stories* (no. 126, 1977); and the issues featuring the ever popular court jester Birbal, such as *Birbal the Witty* (no. 152, 1978) and *Birbal the Clever* (no. 210, 1980). Fans liked these comics for their humor and light-heartedness. One fan, another former Amar Vikas fan club president, simply remarked of them, "the wit was too good!"[9]; while another explained, "the book of *Pañcatantra* is quite big and drab to read. *Amar Chitra Katha* in colored pictures makes the stories of *Pañcatantra* attractive and readable."[10]

Other specific issues that received frequent mention included *Shivaji* (no. 23, 1971), *Bhagat Singh* (no. 234, 1981), and *Chandra Shekhar Azad* (no. 142, 1977) among the historical issues. Shivaji was praised for his "bravery"; Bhagat Singh and Chandra Shekhar Azad for their "patriotism": "All the patriotic ones [are my favorites] – *Bhagat Singh*, *Rash Behari Bose*, *Chandra Shekhar Azad*. I liked them because their stories were true and recent."[11] Another agreed, commenting on the *Chandra Shekhar Azad* issue

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[7] Anonymous fan 7.3 (India), written correspondence with the author, October 20, 2002.
[8] Anonymous fan 7.4, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, December 27, 2001.
[9] Anonymous fan 7.5, interviewed by the author in Calcutta, February 6, 2002.
[10] Anonymous fan 7.6 (India), written correspondence with the author, October 18, 2002.
[11] Anonymous fan 7.7 (U.S.), written correspondence with the author, February 10, 2003.

specifically, "little was known about this great freedom fighter. The comic gave his entire life in a short and easy manner."[12] *Padmini* (no. 44, 1973) also received special mention as a favorite by many readers, both male and female, for her "bravery" and "unrelenting behavior."[13]

Several readers, however, refused to name favorites, telling me that it was simply not possible to pick a few out of so many favorite comics: "There are soooo many. This is not a fair question!" lamented one fan.[14] Another explained his feelings in this way:

> I won't do justice by choosing just a few. I love and cherish each and every single one of them. From the story of Padmini who sacrificed her life, the tyranny of the Muslim rulers who roughed up ancient and glorious India, great women of India, the heroes of battles, the great saints and pious sages of this great land, […], the numerous and wonderful stories of ancient Indian mythology, […], Panchatantra, the freedom fighters of India, to the gods and goddesses of India. A single word description to all these is "INDIA" and that's what I love about these books.[15]

Several scholars of reception theory have noted the importance of repetition, arguing that consumers of many popular entertainment media take pleasure in familiar, even predictable, narrative patterns. Janice Radway, for instance, in her discussion of popular romance novels, comments on the comfort readers take in narrative redundancy:

> Marked redundancy and intertextual repetition are characteristic of romantic fiction. Such a recurring vocabulary inevitably creates stock descriptions and formulaic characterizations that reconfirm reader expectations over and over again. The redundancy of the discourse permits the reader to get by with a minimal amount of interpretive work after her initial encounter with the romantic form. Each subsequent appearance of the first stock adjective can invoke the entire characterization and trigger the reader's usual emotional response as a result of its prior formulaic linkage with an entire set of descriptions and reactions in earlier acts of reading. There is little need for that reader to attend to the nuances of any particular novel in order to understand the nature of the story. Her

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[12] Anonymous fan 7.6, op. cit.

[13] Anonymous fan 7.8, interviewed by the author in Pune, January 21, 2002. But also see the discussion of this issue in Chapter 3.

[14] Anonymous fan 7.7, op. cit.

[15] Anonymous fan 7.9 (U.S.), written correspondence with the author, October 22, 2002.

> energy is reserved, therefore, for the more desirable activity of affective reaction rather than prematurely spent on the merely intermediary task of interpretation.[16]

Similarly, Tania Modleski has argued with regard to the Harlequin brand of romance novels that the company's strict set of rules that it requires its authors to adhere to results in such a formulaic narrative that "the reader who reads the story *already knows the story*, at least in all its essentials."[17] Children, in particular, take comfort in repetition. Discussing the "Nancy Drew" series of formulaic children's books, Meghan O'Rourke observes, "the series was curiously reassuring to kids, who felt that there was an endless supply of goods they knew and liked coming their way… the more books that appeared in any given series, the more children bought them, confident that supply would not run out."[18]

Readers of these Indian comic books are no different. The majority of these readers take pleasure in reading and re-reading comics that adhere to the successful *Amar Chitra Katha* formula: following the hero – or heroine – as they encounters their foes, be they mythological demons or medieval Muslims or colonial officers; engage them in fierce battles; and either emerge victorious or die bravely in the process. With each new comic book issue, the readers anticipate a familiar hero and a familiar story. Especially in the case of the mythological comics, the readers often already know the story that is being told in the comic book before they open it, having been previously exposed to it through a variety of sources including rituals and festivals like Durga Puja, stories told by parents and grandparents, or learned in school or from TV serials. The pleasure they experience in reading these comics, therefore, derives not from the originality of the story

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[16] Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, [1984] 1991), 195-196; see also pages 206-207.
[17] Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 32. Emphasis original.
[18] Meghan O'Rourke, "Nancy Drew's Father: The Fiction Factory of Edward Stratemeyer," *The New Yorker* (Nov. 8, 2004), 128. Thanks to Cynthia Talbot for pointing this article out to me.

or character, but in seeing familiar stories and characters depicted in the comic medium. As one fan commented, "they [*ACK*] were a big part of my childhood days. Fun to read, and read again. If I already knew the story, I would still look for the way it was represented."[19] Another fan expressed similar thoughts: "the stories that they [*ACK*] depict and the pictures are great, it really gives me a better picture of the stories that I have been reading just through words."[20] A third fan noted that even when he thoroughly knew the story, the visual details in the comic could captivate him for hours: "You can look at each picture for hours and admire the care the artist has taken to lay out all the minor details. Like in a war scene, the way broken arrows are strewn around, chariots are lying around, etc."[21]

Notably, the issues readers mentioned most frequently as favorites were some of the most formulaic issues. *Rama*, for instance, introduces us to our hero, Ram, through heroic images of him on the cover and splash page; features Ram's various adventures across the land as he encounters and battles various demons, from the demoness Tataka to the ten-headed Ravana; and emerges victorious at the end of the comic, to be crowned king with his beautiful wife Sita at his side. Similarly, the historical issue *Chandra Shekhar Azad* features our hero Chandra Shekhar on the cover; follows him through his adventures as he joins the non-cooperation movement and repeatedly protests British rule only to be jailed and beaten again and again; and ultimately, after bravely saving his friend, kills himself with his last bullet in a gun battle with forty policemen, becoming "a martyr in the cause of Indian independence."[22] The formula is the same: hero (or

[19] Anonymous fan 7.1, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, October 20, 2001.
[20] Anonymous fan 7.2 (Australia), written correspondence with the author, October 18, 2002.
[21] Anonymous fan 7.3 (India), written correspondence with the author, October 20, 2002.
[22] *Chandra Shekhar Azad*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 142 (Bombay: India Book House, 1977), 31.

heroine) is introduced; hero encounters foes; hero battles foes; hero emerges victorious or dies bravely in the process.

There are several issues within the *Amar Chitra Katha* corpus that have intentionally deviated from that successful formula. How are these comic books received? Do unique comic book issues spark the curiosity of their readers and sell? Or do readers protest such deviations from the comic book template? *Jawaharlal Nehru* (no. 436, 1991) was conceived of as a biographical issue, as was the *Mahatma Gandhi* issue (no. 414, 1989) discussed in the previous chapter. It therefore breaks with the standard formula by refraining from characterizing Nehru as a "hero," and instead endeavors to portray India's first Prime Minister as a more complex historical figure. The issue begins in the year 1716 in Kashmir, and spends the first several pages tracing Jawaharlal Nehru's family lineage. After Jawaharlal finally appears as a baby in the middle of page 5, we slowly follow him through his school days in India, until he is sent to England to continue his schooling at the bottom of page 15. We continue to witness his intellectual growth as he pursues law school in London, and then finally returns to India on page 23. Thereafter he not only gets married and becomes a father, but also begins to get involved in politics by attending meetings of the Indian National Congress and making public speeches. The comic ends with Nehru giving a speech before a rapt audience of village men. Not only does this comic break with the typical formula in its storyline, which is significantly lacking in dramatic action, it is also far more wordy than the average issue, and the images are far more detailed, as in the five panels on page twenty-four **[Fig. 7.1]**. The end result is that this comic book takes far longer to read than most of the other comics in this series, defying the house rule – here articulated by former associate editor Kamala Chandrakant – that comic reading should be fast-paced:

> It must all flow, move together – and fast! A slow pace isn't good for a comic book. A comic book shouldn't be too text-heavy. There should be a fifty-fifty blend of text and image – the script and the illustrations should melt into one another, and the reader shouldn't be able to understand one without the other.[23]

Because of the vast amount of research that went into the making of the *Jawaharlal Nehru* issue, it took many years to complete it. Authors and artists are paid a flat fee for each complete issue, not an hourly rate, so creating such a richly detailed issue was a labor of love on the part of the scriptwriter, Margie Sastry, and the illustrator, Yusuf Bangalorewala. Margie Sastry recalls that it took her about a year to do all of the research, another year to write the script, and then another couple of years for the artist to complete the artwork. She described some of this process to me:

> For the references for *Jawaharlal Nehru*, from books and museums you can find out the details, and you get all the visuals from there. So, you need to know the details of the earlier family, because the story begins from maybe three generations before Nehru. So, you need to know the details of the traditional garments, of what his forefather and all would be wearing. You need the details of the houses that Nehru's forefathers lived in. Plus, when he goes abroad to study, what the college program would look like, and where he stayed. Those details. And I remember the artist who did it was very committed himself, so on his own also he sent out a lot of letters and got a lot of details.[24]

When I asked artist Yusuf Bangalorewala about the time it took him to create this particular issue, he spoke to me in terms of authenticity and restraint:

> Authenticity goes a long way in acquiring credibility; otherwise the book will be tossed aside. The artist as well as the writer must not insult the reader's intelligence. While contemplating a script or at work, I never thought about the audience – children, reviewers, art critics, scriptwriters, et al. However, when I got done with a page, I did ask family members and friends about their views, and promptly corrected foolish lapses. My work ethic was based on the simple idea that if a thing's worth doing, it is worth doing well. … For the illustrator, imagination and historical facts are like oil and water. Illustrating history calls for great restraint on the part of an illustrator. In India trigger-happy artists misuse

[23] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.
[24] Margie Sastry, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, January 11, 2002.

> the creative license only to beget scorn of serious scholars and belittling the illustrated book to a lower genre – just a "comic book."[25]

Mr. Bangalorewala, who took his work very seriously, was committed to creating a product that would be considered "art," not mere "popular art," and that would honor India's first Prime Minister.

Unfortunately, however, sales of the *Jawaharlal Nehru* issue were very disappointing: only 24,000 copies of the issue sold during 1991 – nowhere close to the break-even mark of 40,000 copies.[26] After this disheartening response, Anant Pai and the other producers of *Amar Chitra Katha* decided to stop creating new comic book issues. As discussed in Chapter 1, a variety of reasons lie behind the slump in sales that occurred at this time, but in my talks with fans many voiced the complaint that biographical issues like *Jawaharlal Nehru* were just too "boring." Said one fan, "*ACK* are pure fun and a great timepass, especially the mythological ones. But the bio[graphical]s like *[Jawaharlal] Nehru* and *[G.D.] Birla* create a boring mood."[27] Said another, "I subscribed and waited anxiously for each new *ACK*. I was excited when the mythologicals and Panchatantras arrived, and disappointed when the ones that felt like schoolbooks arrived to teach about our leaders, but even drab stories are made interesting with pictures."[28]

An Exciting Find (no. 430, 1990) and *Indus Valley Adventure* (no. 432, 1990) are two of the issues that deviate the most from the traditional heroic formula. In these issues our "heroes" are Vijay and Durga, a fictitious brother-and-sister team that is on holiday in Harappa with their grandfather, an amateur archaeologist. They are completely bored with their grandfather's history lesson, until they uncover a time machine that takes them

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[25] Yusuf Bangalorewala, written correspondence with the author, April 12, 2002.
[26] Vikram Doctor, "The Return of the Mythological Heroes," *Businessworld* (June 7, 1997), 38.
[27] Anonymous fan 7.13 (India), written correspondence with the author, October 21, 2002. Brackets mine.
[28] Anonymous fan 7.14, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, November 10, 2001.

back to the year 2,000 B.C.E. when the Indus Valley Civilization was thriving. There they learn all about the civilization by walking through the markets, playing with the local children, and attending a public sacrifice before returning back to their own time. Author Yagya Sharma described his idea for this unique series in this way:

> I said, let's try using the common people as the central figures. Then we could write history from a completely different perspective. … I thought we could look at the period from Harappa up to Akbar. Stopping at Akbar, because he was the last glorious king in India. And starting with Harappa because at that time there was a lot of new information coming out about that civilization. Lots of research was needed, a different kind of research, to write from this perspective. So we began with the *Indus Valley Adventure.* … We planned two or three others on the Indus Valley, with these same characters, and then we were going to move on to the Vedic period.[29]

Artist Yusuf Bangalorewala worked on *An Exciting Find*, and was very enthusiastic about it:

> My best work for *Amar Chitra Katha* from a technical point of view was [*An Exciting Find*], an adventure of a twin brother and sister duo who are transported to 4500 BC right into the Indus Valley or Harappan civilization. Did Anant Pai show you this book? They published just a few copies that were available for around six months. After that there [were] no reprints. Maybe it failed to sell owing to an ugly cover done by a wannabe illustrator, but in my opinion the inside stuff made it the most well illustrated, adventurous, exciting and thrilling book for Indian children during that period: it was done with a Rotring pen with a full ink reservoir to last two or three pages, unlike *Mirabai* or *Tansen* that were done with a bare crowquill nib dipped every twenty seconds into an ink pot! I did this classy book just before I did *[Jawaharlal] Nehru*, around 1988-1989.[30]

Like Mr. Bangalorewala, Mr. Sharma also speculated about the reasons behind the publication of only these first two issues in the series:

> I had to leave – I could not make enough of a living just writing the comic book scripts. So I took another position. Possibly they couldn't find the right author to write these scripts. It takes a lot of imagination to create new characters out of nothing, and to tell the story from this sort of perspective. It is an unusual

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[29] Yagya Sharma, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 16, 2002. *An Exciting Find* was actually the first issue in the series, and *Indus Valley Adventure* was the second.

[30] Yusuf Bangalorewala, written correspondence with the author, August 21, 2004.

> perspective. Perhaps the perspective was just too unusual – perhaps it didn't appeal.[31]

According to Anant Pai, sales for these two issues were very disappointing, suggesting that the perspective may have been too unusual for the audience: "We received a few positive letters. But we received many more letters of complaint, requesting that we bring back the old heroes."[32] Therefore, the other scripts that had originally been envisioned as part of this novel series were abandoned.

For the vast majority of the readers I spoke with, both in India and in the diaspora, the perceived authenticity of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series was a key reason for its popularity. These readers were not interested in time machines or other fictionalized novelties, nor were they interested in reading about "common people" as the central figures in these comics. Instead, they wanted to read about their Indian heritage, to envision it, to believe in it. But they also wanted heroes – heroes who would encounter and battle their foes and either emerge victorious or die bravely in the process. For them, this is what "Indianness" consists of. Again and again in my discussions of the comics with these fans the term "Indian" arose alongside terms like "authenticity" and "accuracy." For instance, one thirty-something Indian woman now living in the U.S. described the comics this way when asked to name a few of her favorite issues:

> This is really hard! I can't put a number on my favorite books. Each one is a masterpiece. I love them all – mythological, historical, folk tales, Panchatantra, etc. The basis behind each story has been carefully studied and mentioned on the first page of each book. It is completely Indian.[33]

Another reader, a twenty-something man from Bangalore now living in the U.S., expressed similar sentiments:

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[31] Yagya Sharma, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 16, 2002

[32] Anant Pai, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 17, 2002.

[33] Anonymous fan 7.15 (U.S.), written correspondence with the author, November 21, 2002.

> In my opinion [*ACK*'s] accuracy and authenticity is 100%. The source from which every book is taken is clearly mentioned at the beginning. So how many ever versions there are – the source is clearly mentioned which makes it all the more accurate and authentic. It is all 100% Indian. I trust these comic makers to the fullest without a second thought. So far I have never encountered even a single grammatical mistake in each of their books I have read. I feel they know what they are doing and they have set the highest standards in comic making.[34]

Through fan activities including Amar Vikas fan clubs, letter writing, and attending quiz contests, "fancy dress" parties, and other events sponsored by the comic book company, as well as through the purchase of issues, readers like these convey their feelings to Anant Pai and the other producers of *Amar Chitra Katha*, helping to co-create the vision of India that is constructed by these immortal picture stories. Over the past forty years, generations of fans have inundated the offices of India Book House with letters expressing their love for the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics and their vision of India. These days, the *Amar Chitra Katha/Tinkle* office receives approximately 6,000 letters per month, according to the current associate editor.[35] On several occasions I sat with the office staff as they sorted through the mail, piling the fan letters (the majority of which were in English, though a good number were in Hindi as well) into different groups: letters of appreciation written to Anant Pai or a favorite author or artist; stories submitted by fans for the Amar Vikas newsletter or *Tinkle*; reports on fan club activities from fan club presidents; mail-in orders or subscriptions to be processed; and the occasional letter of complaint from a disgruntled reader. Letters that fall into the last category are always set aside for review and personal responses from the editor or associate editor – including one letter from a disappointed girl who had burnt the rejection letter she received for her submission to the "Amar Vikas" fan newsletter, put its ashes in an envelope, and mailed

[34] Anonymous fan 7.12, op. cit.
[35] Reena Puri, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, October 11, 2001.

it back along with a note saying that she was "sick and tired" of receiving rejection notices.[36]

Such activity and input demonstrates that fans are not always simply passive consumers of mass-mediated culture, but can be creators in their own right. Henry Jenkins, author of a study on television and participatory fandom in the West, describes such active fans in this way:

> The fans' response typically involves not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism, and it is the combination of the two responses which motivates their active engagement with the media. Because popular narratives often fail to satisfy, fans must struggle with them, to try to articulate to themselves and others unrealized possibilities within the original works. Because the texts continue to fascinate, fans cannot dismiss them from their attention but rather must try to find ways to salvage them for their interests. Far from syncopathic, fans actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions. In the process, fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings.[37]

Fans of *Amar Chitra Katha* not only participate in the production process through their consumption practices,[38] but many have also gone on to create their own "immortal picture stories" of India by writing and submitting new scripts, creating their own comics in Amar Vikas fan clubs, and even going to work for *Amar Chitra Katha*, *Tinkle*, and other Indian comic book companies as authors, artists, and editors. Indeed, several of the early-twenty-something employees at *Tinkle* that I spoke with fondly recalled reading

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[36] Letter from an anonymous fan, received November 2, 2001. My thanks to Reena, Priya, Gayathri, Snigdha, and Jaya for allowing me to read through these letters with them on several occasions.

[37] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23-24.

[38] For theoretical discussions of the relationship between production and consumption, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (second edition, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 72-73; Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-138. For further discussions of reception theory, also see Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

Amar Chitra Katha and *Tinkle* comics while they were growing up, and admitted that they were inspired by them to seek employment in the comic book world.

Of these active consumers' voices, one of the most interesting, in my opinion, is that of the U.S.-based artist Chitra Ganesh, who uses digital manipulation, collage, and other techniques to alter the narratives of *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books and thereby infuse them with new meaning – or, in the words of Henry Jenkins, to articulate the "unrealized possibilities within the original works." Ganesh has created her own 24-page comic book, *Tales of Amnesia* (2002), as well as a number of larger single-panel prints, in which she questions the exclusive definition of "Indianness" presented in this comic book series by raising queer issues, feminist critiques, and making more subtle commentaries upon life in the diaspora. In her own words, she engages "familiar narrative and pictorial conventions to draw the viewer into a tale of disintegration and discomfort."[39] For the cover of her *Tales of Amnesia* comic book **[Fig. 7.2]**, she has adapted the splash page from the *Hanuman* (no. 19, 1971) issue [refer to Fig. 2.2], transforming the mythological monkey hero into a half-monkey, half-human *junglee* girl who defies social norms. In these pages she depicts lesbian sexuality; draws connections between the plight of women in premodern India and Indian women in the diaspora **[Fig. 7.3]**; and pairs fractured bodies with jarring, violent text segments. When asked what first led her to *Amar Chitra Katha* and prompted her to consider using these comics in her own artwork, Ganesh replied:

> I read these comics as a kid, and it was in large part the way I learned about Indian myth, history and religion. A few years ago, my girlfriend sent me a care package when I was away at a residency with a few of these books. From that point on, this work grew out of revisiting and dissecting stories of the *Amar Chitra Katha*, a popular religious comic used to disseminate "authentic" Indian culture to the subcontinent and diaspora. I interrupt the original tales by inserting dissonant dialogue into stories, and fracturing the coherence of bodies that inhabit

[39] Chitra Ganesh, written correspondence with the author, July 16, 2004.

> them. Bodies split open, double, and otherwise transform as history and fantasy merge. In the process, I want to unsettle traditional narrative structures and activate the comic's potential as a subversive form.[40]

Yet I do not want to paint a simplified picture of readers as either passively compliant with or actively resistant to the hegemonic concept of Indian identity, for these categories are not mutually exclusive.[41] During a conversation with one college student in Bombay, I learned that compliance and resistance could exist in tandem. She first explained that she enjoyed the comics because "the men are so muscular and the women are so pretty… their dress, their ornaments are just so amazing. I even try to paint them after reading them." Just a few minutes later, however, she commented:

> Actually, though, they are only perpetuating stereotypes... They have those curvaceous women revealing everything in fanciful dresses and exotic jewelry. I mean, look how they show the women as being so coy, yet showing everything, even their navels![42]

Another reader who simultaneously resisted and supported the dominant conception of Indian identity was Zarina Mehta, a Parsi woman who is now a director at UTV. She explained her decision to produce a TV serial based on the ACK comics to me:

> The comics were quite popular with many Indian children when I was growing up, Hindus and also non-Hindus, like me. They are the reason that we know India's mythology, the reason we can visualize it and remember it. So we thought a TV serial based on these comics could help bring India's history and mythology to a new generation.[43]

The TV series aired on Doordarshan 1 in 1998, and even though it was meant to teach Hindus and non-Hindus about "India's mythology," the airing of episodes like "Ganesh,"

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[40] Chitra Ganesh, ibid.

[41] Here I am indebted to Purnima Mankekar's discussion of reception in *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnology of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 28-29.

[42] Anonymous fan 7.13, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 27, 2002. See Chapter 3 for a further discussion of the depiction of women in this comic book series.

[43] Zarina Mehta, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 11, 2002.

"Krishna," and "Shakuntala" may well have contributed to the ongoing erasure of the margin between "Indian culture" and "Hindu culture."

MANUFACTURING INDIANNESS

After I conducted my first interview with former associate editor Subba Rao, he asked me a question: "You are studying *Amar Chitra Katha* and Indian identity. But do you think these are very important for Indian identity?" I replied that I did think so. He countered, "I think that if you asked me the top twenty things that make up my Indian identity, *ACK* would probably not be on the list. You see, if you take the whole population of India, and then take the number of those Indians who read *ACK*, you will see that the two numbers are very different." When I stated that I understood that it was primarily middle-class, English-speaking Indians who read these comic books, Subba Rao replied,

> Yes, exactly. Because only they can find and have the money to purchase these comics. And also the medium itself affects the market. You see, the comics never sold very well in languages other than English, even in Hindi. I think that the medium was weird for those readers. But to kids who knew English and already read other comic books, comics like *Archie's* and *Asterix*, they would like this medium too. So you must keep this in mind when you study identity.[44]

As Mr. Rao accurately suggests, *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books are not read by every Indian. During the course of my research, I learned that the majority of the comic book readers were English-speaking, middle-class, upper-caste Hindus. But for this substantial and powerful segment of the population from the 1970s to today – a segment that easily numbers in the tens of millions – these comic books have been incredibly important to the formation of their identities.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, the producers of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books emphasize the "authenticity" of this comic book series, even when they have taken

[44] Subba Rao, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 5, 2002.

substantial liberties with those stories – such as the sanitization of the goddess Kali – in order to market them to this middle-class, upper-caste Hindu audience. And the comic book fans, in turn, stress the "authenticity" of this comic book series – again and again I was told that it was completely "authentic" and completely "Indian." Why has this Indian comic book series survived, when many others have failed? I believe it is because Anant Pai knew exactly how to provide his core audience with what they craved: all of the exciting action and heroism of the comic book medium, but with an "authentic" Indian twist. Anant Pai instinctively knew that and delivered that, again and again – he manufactured Indianness in the comic book format. Other Indian comics that were strictly regional in their focus, or were cheap action pulps without mythic or historic foundation, have come and gone in the years that *Amar Chitra Katha* has thrived.

Through input from his fans, Anant Pai kept working over the years to perfect his comic book formula: miracles must be shown; "boring" biographical comics that are too text-heavy won't sell; mythological and historical issues with strong, active heroes will sell well and should be reprinted. Studying the production and the consumption of this comic book series, in addition to a serious analysis of content, allows us to understand why the discourse of "authenticity" that surrounds these mythological and historical comic books is essential to both the production and the consumption processes. It is not just a marketing ploy, on the part of the producers, used to attract parents, educators, students, and other potential consumers; nor is it a just scheme on the part of children who want to be allowed to buy and read comics. Rather, this discourse of authenticity is indicative of the ongoing effort on the part of the rising upper-caste Hindu middle classes – both producers and consumers – to legitimate their beliefs and practices, and their visions of the Indian past and future, and to redefine them as authentic and as representative of India's national culture.

Furthermore, *Amar Chitra Katha*'s unique vision of authentic, heroic Indianness has caused the series not only to thrive over the years when other Indian comic book series have failed, but has also helped to shape the public culture that followed it. The two predominant and most distinctive forms of comic books in the world today are those of America and Japan. Structurally, Indian comic books are closer to American comics than to Japanese; like mainstream American comic books, Indian comics have far more words than their Japanese counterparts, and use far fewer frames and pages to depict an action or thought. Artistically, Indian comic books are also more like American comics in their depiction of the human form, which relies more on the tradition of naturalism than do Japanese comics. As discussed in Chapter 1, the similarities between Indian and American comics derive largely from the fact that *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books were inspired by the American comic books that were available in India in the 1950s and 60s, including *Phantom*, *Mandrake*, and *Tarzan*. However, Indian comic books also diverge from American comic books in a couple of very significant and interconnected ways.

First, we have also seen that in addition to being influenced by Western artistic traditions, Indian comic books draw on a long tradition of Indian visual culture, and have been especially influenced by the period of Indian nationalist art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the early Indian cinema. This has led to the realization of a "distinct gaze" in Indian comic books, one that differs from American comics in that it frequently alternates between narrative and iconic images, and at times may even collapse the two.[45] Discussing the importance of continuity in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books, former associate editor/author Kamala Chandrakant stated:

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[45] On this "distinct gaze" in early Indian cinema, see Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology," in T. Niranjana et al., *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1993), 68-69. The "gaze" is discussed further in Chapter 3; narrative and iconic images are discussed in Chapter 4.

> It was while editing the *Vasavadatta* issue that it first hit me that there needs to be continuity between text and image, and between frames. So we showed a woman in the distance, then closer in the next panel, and then finally as part of the foreground in the third panel. This makes the story flow, in the images and the narration. As you work in the job you learn about such things as cinematic continuity.[46]

Pratap Mulick, the illustrator of the Vasavadatta issue mentioned by Kamala Chandrakant, also spoke in terms of cinematic continuity:

> You know, comic book art is similar to cinematography. It has close-ups, middle shots, long shots. We must imagine that we're part of the action. The camera moves as if we're right there, involved. So also the reader should feel present, involved. This is the artist's job.[47]

A range of "shots" can indeed be seen in the *Vasavadatta* issue (no. 30, 1972), from long shots that show Vasavadatta's whole body as she interacts with other characters to close-ups that focus on her face at emotional points in the story **[Fig. 7.4]**. Just as the Indian painter Ravi Varma's technique of the frozen dramatic moment – discussed in Chapter 3 – which allows the eye to linger upon the heroine's form was incorporated into the theatre and cinema, with iconic, frontal presentations of the actors constantly interrupting the continuous story so as to allow the viewer time for a double-take, so also does the comic book repeatedly alternate frontal and iconic shots with action shots, close-ups with long shots, thereby directly involving the viewer in the narrative. A page from the *Malavika* comic book (no. 103, 1976) is a good example **[Fig. 7.5]**: here the action of Malavika's dance is repeatedly interrupted with close-up shots of the hero and heroine that linger upon their eyes, but what is presumably a conjoint gaze as they look at one another is instead presented frontally in turns so that each of their gazes can be reflected upon the reader. Here this frontal relationship with the reader is privileged over a more

[46] Kamala Chandrakant, interviewed by the author in Chennai, February 24, 2002.
[47] Pratap Mulick, interviewed by the author in Pune, January 21, 2002.

narratively "realistic" presentation of the relationship between the hero and heroine within the frame.

The external reader is privileged over the internal storyline in comics featuring Hindu deities as well, as in a panel from the *Sati and Shiva* comic book (no. 111, 1976) in which Sati is shown praying to Lord Shiva, who faces the reader outside the frame rather than his devotee within the frame **[Fig. 7.6]**. Similarly, in *The Gita* (no. 127, 1977), as Krishna makes his famous speech to Arjuna in the midst of the battlefield, panels in which Krishna addresses Arjuna are alternated with those in which he directs his remarks directly to the reader. Just before Krishna reveals his divine form to Arjuna, a close-up shot of Krishna's eyes is featured, with a dialogue balloon in which Krishna appears to address the viewer directly: "It is a form you cannot see with naked eyes. You need divine vision. I bestow it on you."[48] Because of this direct address to the reader, when Krishna does reveal his divine form in a full-page panel on the next page [refer to Fig. 6.7], it is as though he has done so primarily for our edification as readers. These images do not derive from any generic comic book formula, but are instead part of the "distinct gaze" that belongs to comics and other new media in South Asia. They call to mind the central Hindu ritual concept of darśan, according to which a devotee not only sees a deity, but must also be seen by that deity.[49] Here it is evident how Hindu religious practices have influenced the very form of these comic books, as they have influenced the form of painting, poster art, and cinema in South Asia as well.

Significantly, however, the producers of *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books also use this technique of frontality in order to involve their audience in the historical narratives – as in Chapter 6, when the reader is implicated in the shooting of Mahatma Gandhi.

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[48] *The Gita*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 127 (Bombay: India Book House, 1977), 26.

[49] See Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Diving Image in India* (Second revised edition, Chambersburg: Anima Books, 1981).

Another example can be seen in the *Babasaheb Ambedkar* issue (no. 188, 1979), which features a panel wherein Ambedkar gives a speech before a large audience. However, Ambedkar is shown with his back turned towards that audience, so that both audience and speaker face the reader outside the frame **[Fig. 7.7]**. Here again the frozen moment of realism is subservient to the frontal imperative, and as Kajri Jain notes in her discussion of calendar art, the fact that this visual schema recurs in images beyond the immediate framework of Hindu icons is "evidence that 'secular' contexts are often structured in terms best understood with reference to some notion of the sacred."[50]

This brings me to the second way in which Indian comic books diverge from American comics: in their combination of mythology and history, secular and sacred. The overlapping of history and mythology is an issue that is certainly relevant in many media and cultures. However, its particular manifestation in this Indian medium is worthy of our consideration. In my interviews with the producers of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books, I found this slippage between the secular and the sacred to be very prevalent. For example, when I went to interview one artist, Dilip Kadam, he immediately turned the tables and began the interview by asking me what I knew of Indian mythology, and whether I believed that the mythological stories were true. Concerned that I might offend him, but also wary of the renewed communal agitation over Ayodhya, I responded with a rather lengthy explanation to the effect that I believed that some of the events of the epics could have happened, but that I also thought that these stories weren't meant to be taken literally at every point, and that I did not agree with many of the ways in which the stories were used for political purposes. Somewhat impatient with my answer, Mr. Kadam responded:

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[50] Kajri Jain, "The Efficacious Image: Pictures and Power in Indian Mass Culture," *Polygraph*, no. 12 (2000), 165; see also her discussion of frontality in a Nehru print on page 174.

> Yes, Ayodhya is one thing, something different. But you must believe that these mythologies happened. You can't think of them as a novel, as fiction. Artists must believe. Artists must believe that these mythologies happened – or else how can they draw them?[51]

I then asked him if there was any difference between history and mythology. Much like the fan who told me that the *Rāmāyaṇa* was not mythology as the British deemed it, but history, Mr. Kadam's response was:

> No, there is no difference between history and mythology. You see, Americans and British – they write history. But mythology, mythology is Indian history. Like Ved Vyasa, you know? Ved Vyasa wrote the *Mahabharat*, wrote 18 stories, books. He is our historian.[52]

In a later interview with another comic book artist, Souren Roy, I brought up this conversation and asked him for his thoughts on it. He too felt that the mythological stories were true, and that belief in these stories was necessary to the correct depiction of them:

> Yes, we are Hindus. We believe in the powers of the gods and goddesses. They can walk in the sky, they can fly, they have all sorts of supernatural powers. Like Durga – there are so many stories, and unless you believe them you cannot draw them. Belief is necessary.[53]

Artist Pratap Mulick also felt that belief was necessary: "Of course an artist must believe that the *Mahabharata*, etc. happened. How could he draw them otherwise?" I asked him, does one have to be a Hindu, then, to draw such images? He replied, "No, no. Whether Hindu, Jain, etc. a person can create such images. It is not a question of being Hindu, it is a question of being Indian and knowing India's history."[54]

As we have seen, not all comic book producers and not all comic book consumers believe that "being Indian" means believing in the literal truth of the *Mahābhārata* or the

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[51] Dilip Kadam, interviewed by the author in Pune, January 20, 2002 [Hindi].
[52] Dilip Kadam, ibid.
[53] Souren Roy, interviewed by the author in Calcutta, February 5, 2002.
[54] Pratap Mulick, interviewed by the author in Pune, January 21, 2002.

Rāmāyaṇa. But a vast majority of them do. They agree that the very combination of history and mythology that is found in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series, with its dual emphasis on "authenticity" and heroism, is what uniquely defines "Indianness." Furthermore, as we have seen, this definition of "Indianness" entails a particularly upper-caste, middle-class Hindu interpretation of these historical and mythological sources. And this is the legacy of *Amar Chitra Katha*.

The production of *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books began in 1967, before satellite television had become entrenched in urban India, and these comic books have had a direct, though little-recognized, influence on this medium in India. Sales of the comic books boomed from the 1970s to the mid-80s. Suddenly, in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, India witnessed "a dramatic expansion of television in different parts of India, with the number of transmitters increasing from 26 in 1982 to 523 in 1991."[55] In 1984, the first televised entertainment serial was introduced, enthralling viewers, and other tremendously successful serials quickly followed. From January of 1987 to September of 1990, Ramanand Sagar's "Ramayan" serial aired, captivating viewers across the nation in an unprecedented way. Philip Lutgendorf reports that conservative estimates of Doordarshan's daily viewership during this period range from 40 to 60 million, with the most popular episodes being viewed by anywhere from 80 to 100 million people.[56] As discussed in Chapter 1, *Amar Chitra Katha* and Doordarshan were competing for the same audience, and Doordarshan appeared to be winning. Not only was Doordarshan's core target audience the urban middle class, but its regular viewers were women and

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[55] Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 5.

[56] Philip Lutgendorf, "All in the (Raghu) Family: A Video Epic in Cultural Context," in Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 223. See also Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. pages 72-120 and page 326 note 48 for further viewership statistics.

children – the very audience that had previously been such loyal purchasers of the comic books.[57]

But I believe that it is too limiting to understand the relationship between comic books and television in India as merely a competitive one. Lutgendorf has commented on the "homogenization" he sees between the comic books and the "Ramayan" TV serial, noting, "visually speaking, the characters and settings of the Sagar serial look much like those of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books…"[58] Former associate editor Yagya Sharma had an explanation for this homogenization that is present in both the "Ramayan" and "Mahabharat" TV serials:

> I have a story to tell you about that. You see, when the "Mahabharat" TV serial was being made – this was over 10 years ago – I had a friend who was a cameraman on the set. And he told me that they often brought the *ACK Mahabharata* series onto the set and used it as reference material – for the dress, the buildings, and also for the episodes, the content. It is Kamala Chandrakant who deserves the credit for this. She was thorough; very, very careful with regards to authenticity. For every event that occurs in the *ACK Mahabharata* – the 42 volume set! – there is an actual sloka on that event in Sanskrit in the *Mahabharata*.[59]

Television producers have repeatedly turned to the *Amar Chitra Katha* series as reference material for costume design, set production, and especially as the inspiration behind the subject matter – both mythological and historical – for new Indian TV serials. When making her live-action serial based on the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books in the late 1990s, Zarina Mehta stated that the idea seemed plausible to her because the comic books are quite cinematic already, particularly in the way that they "alternate action with a lot of drama and emotion," which makes their adaptation to the television medium a relatively

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[57] See Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, op. cit., 6.
[58] Philip Lutgendorf, "All in the (Raghu) Family," op. cit., 246.
[59] Yagya Sharma, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, March 16, 2002.

simple process.[60] Additionally, as discussed above, Ms. Mehta was inspired to undertake this project because she credited these comic books with helping her to visualize India's history and mythology, and wanted to bring that Indian heritage to a new generation. During the making of this series, the Sagars, who produced the "Ramayan" TV serial, and the Chopras, who produced the "Mahabharat" TV serial, each co-produced some of the *ACK* TV episodes, thus furthering the homogenization.[61]

Scholars have recognized the significant ramifications of televised serials like "Ramayan" and "Mahabharat" upon politics and public culture in India.[62] What scholars of media, religion, and culture have overlooked is that *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books are more than just one more life of these narrative traditions; they have been instrumental in manufacturing Indianness out of upper-caste, middle-class, Hindu versions of these mythological and historical traditions – an Indianness that is widely perceived to be both heroic and authentic, and has had a significant impact upon the public sphere in India.

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[60] Zarina Mehta, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 11, 2002. This TV serial is discussed in Chapter 1.

[61] Zarina Mehta, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, April 11, 2002.

[62] For instance, Philip Lutgendorf, "All in the (Raghu) Family," op. cit.; Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, op. cit.; Romila Thapar, "The *Ramayana* Syndrome," *Seminar*, no. 353 (January 1989); and Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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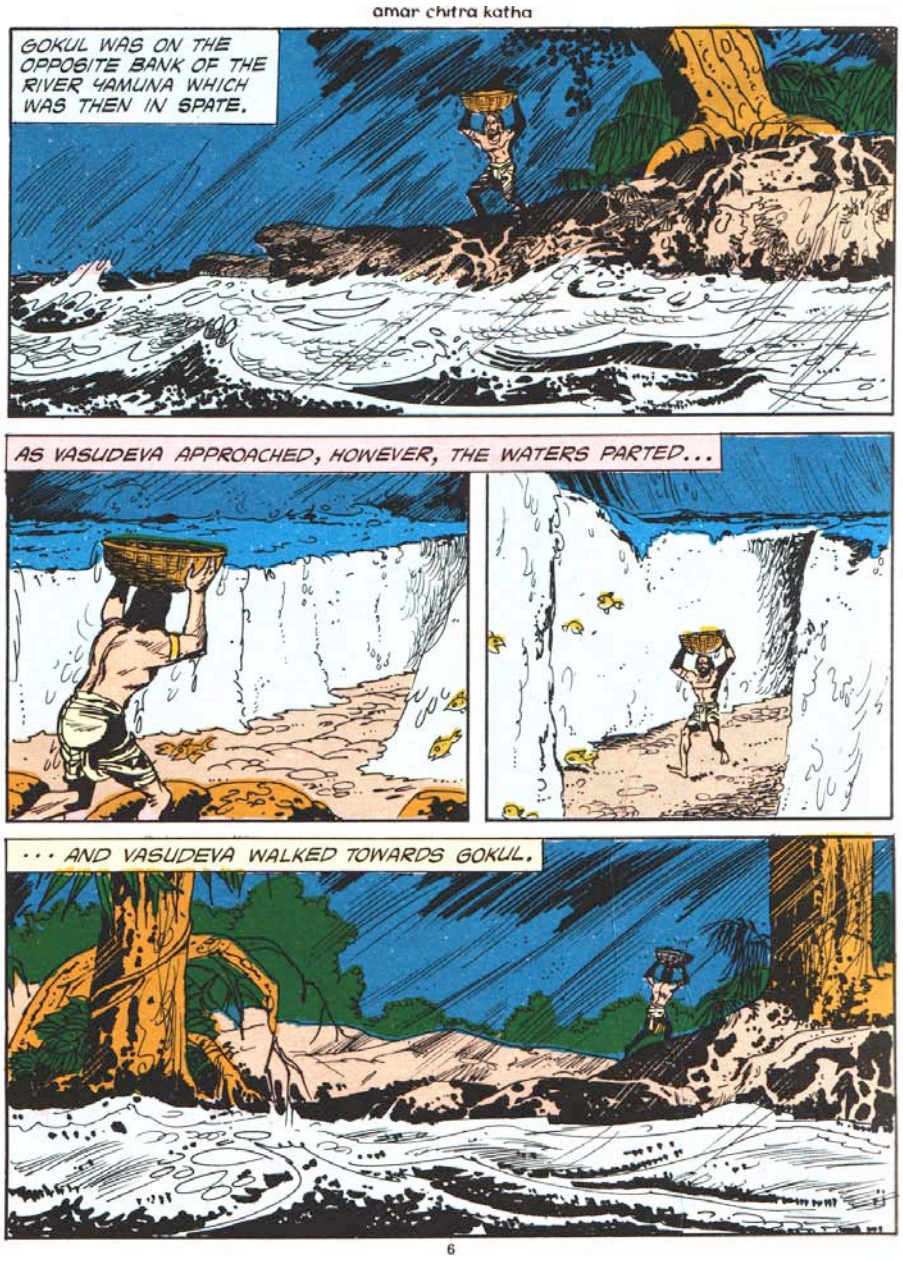
1.2: *Krishna*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 501 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1992 [1969]), 21. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.



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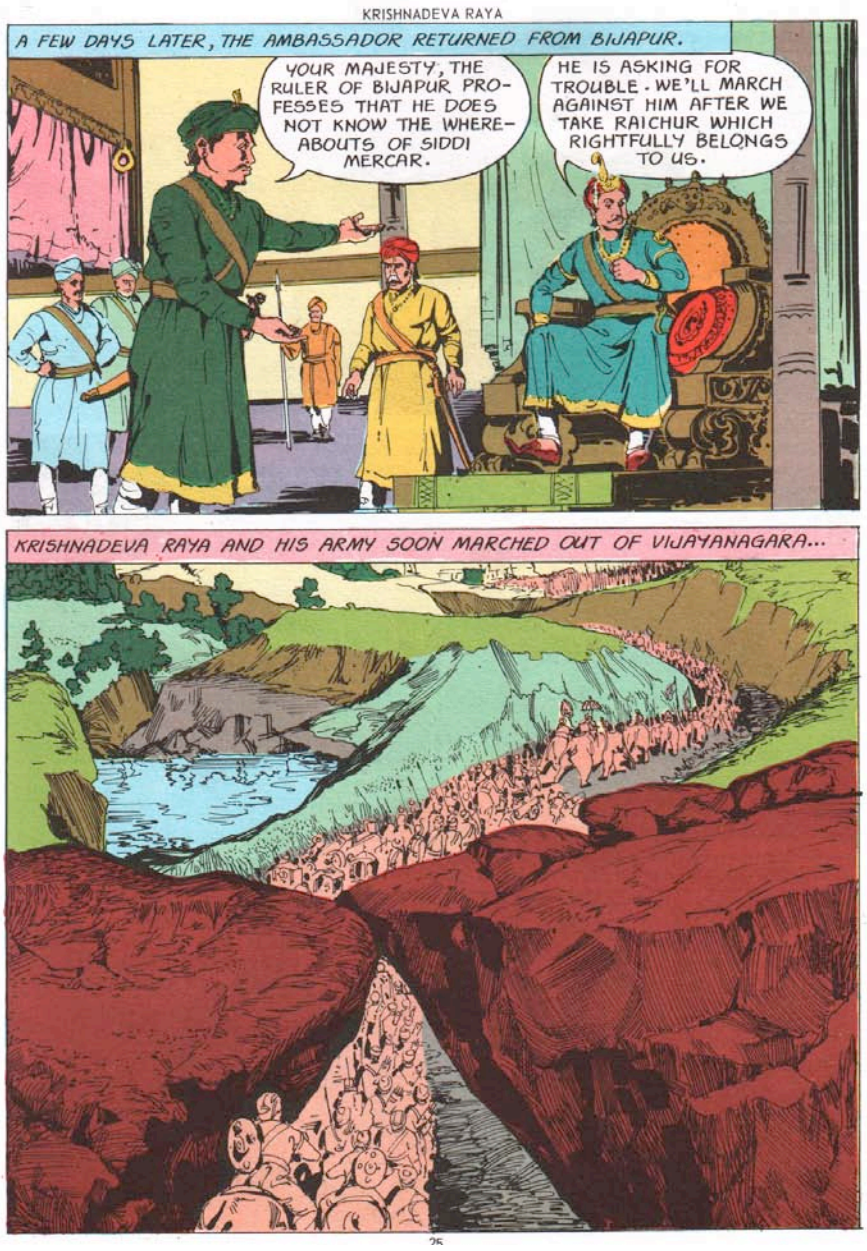

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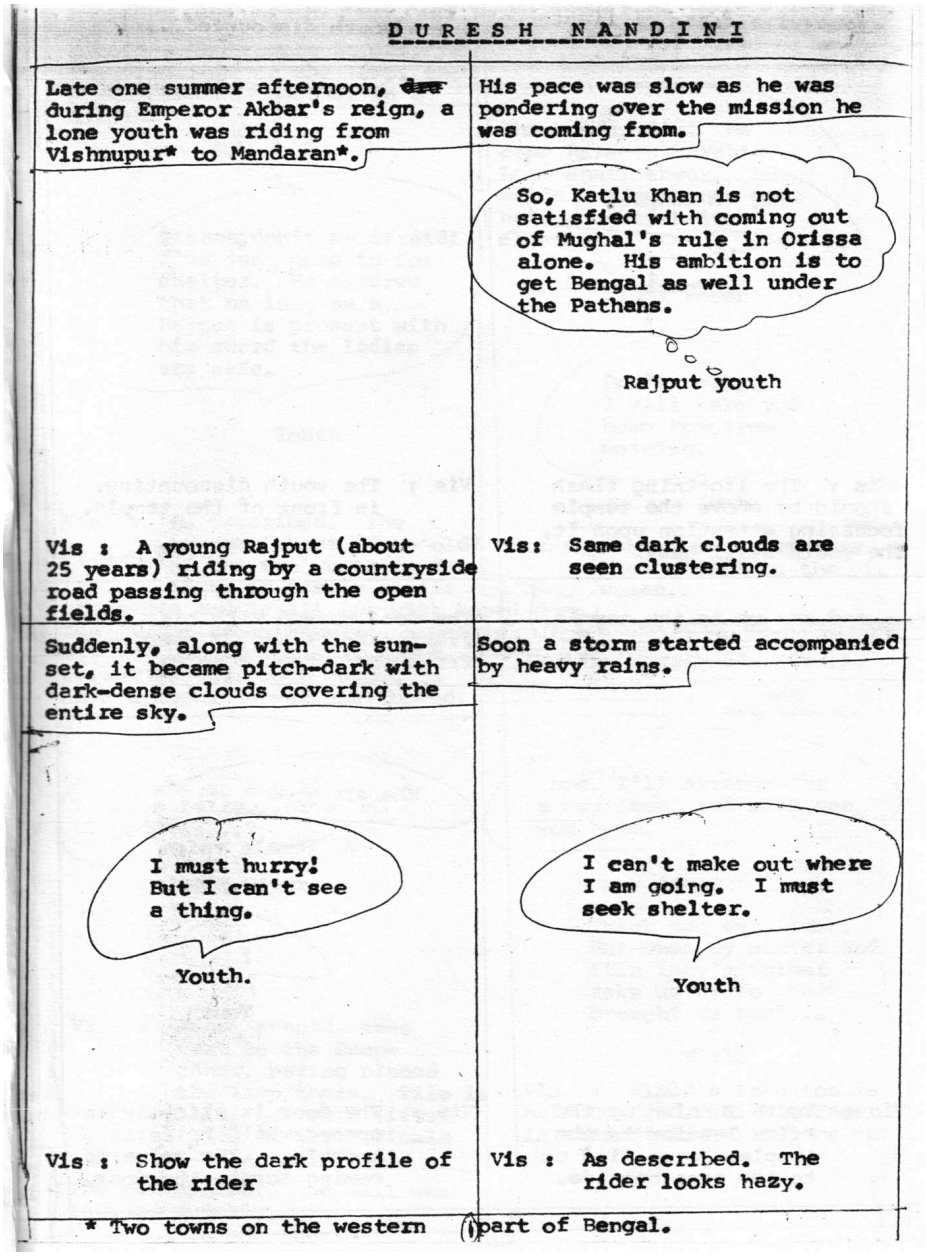

1.5: Durgesh Nandini script, 1.

1.6: *Durgesh Nandini, Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 294 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1983), 1. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

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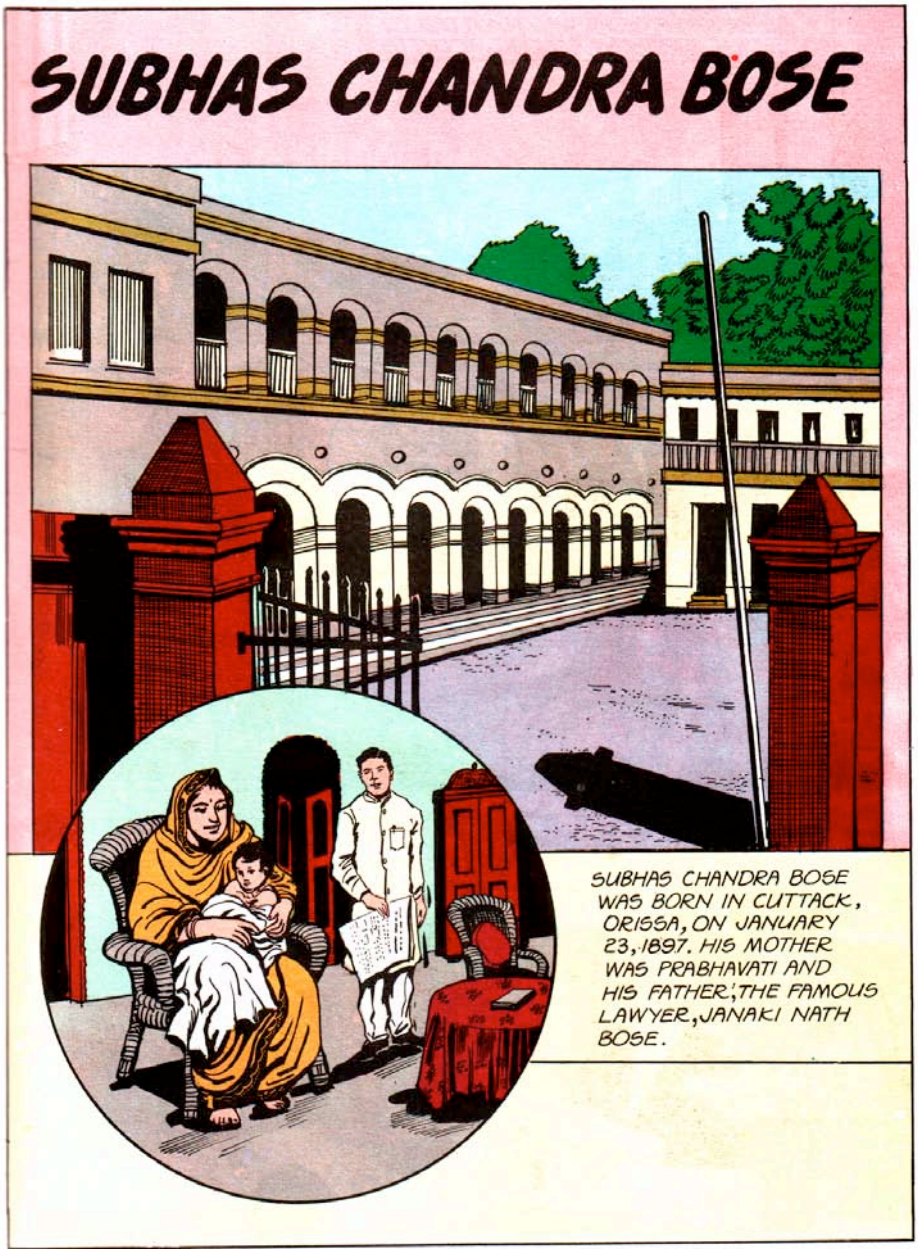

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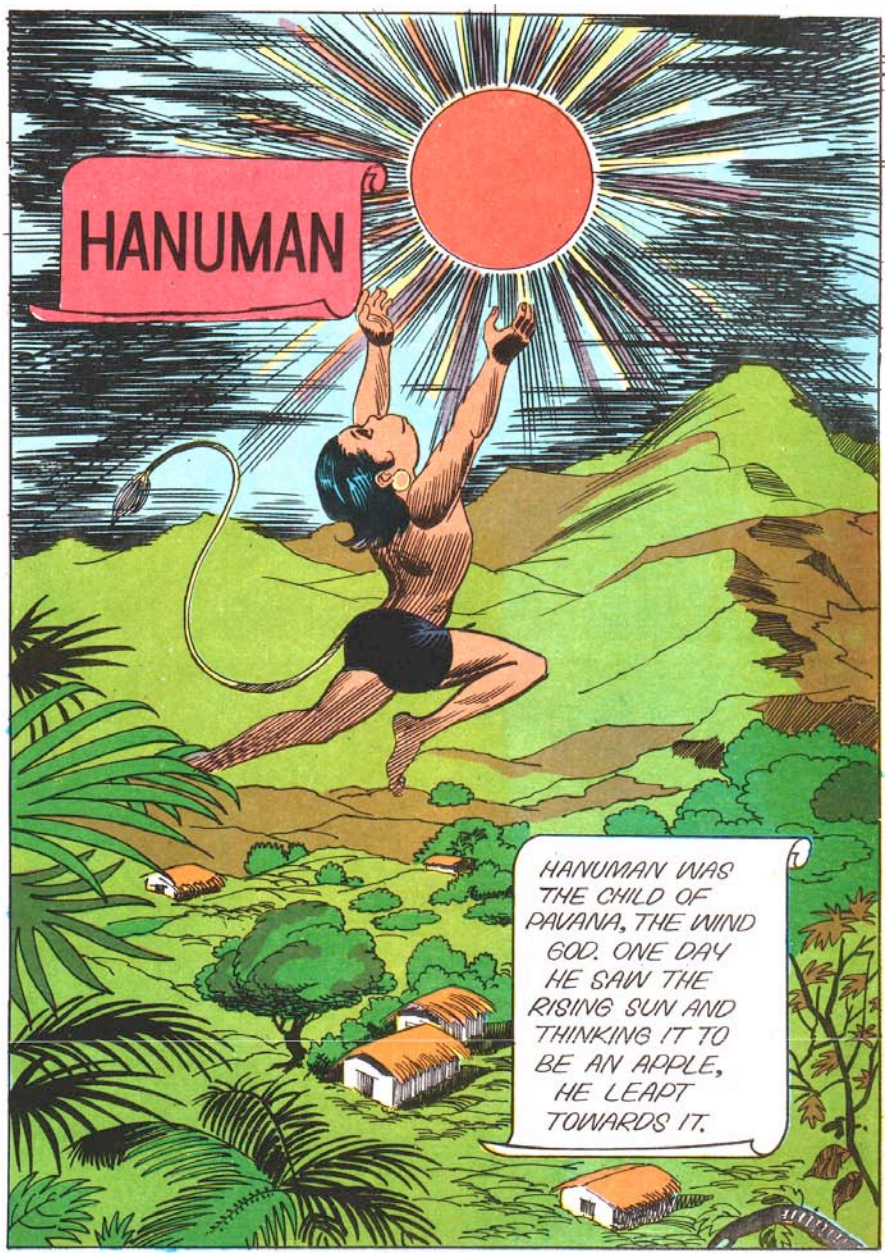

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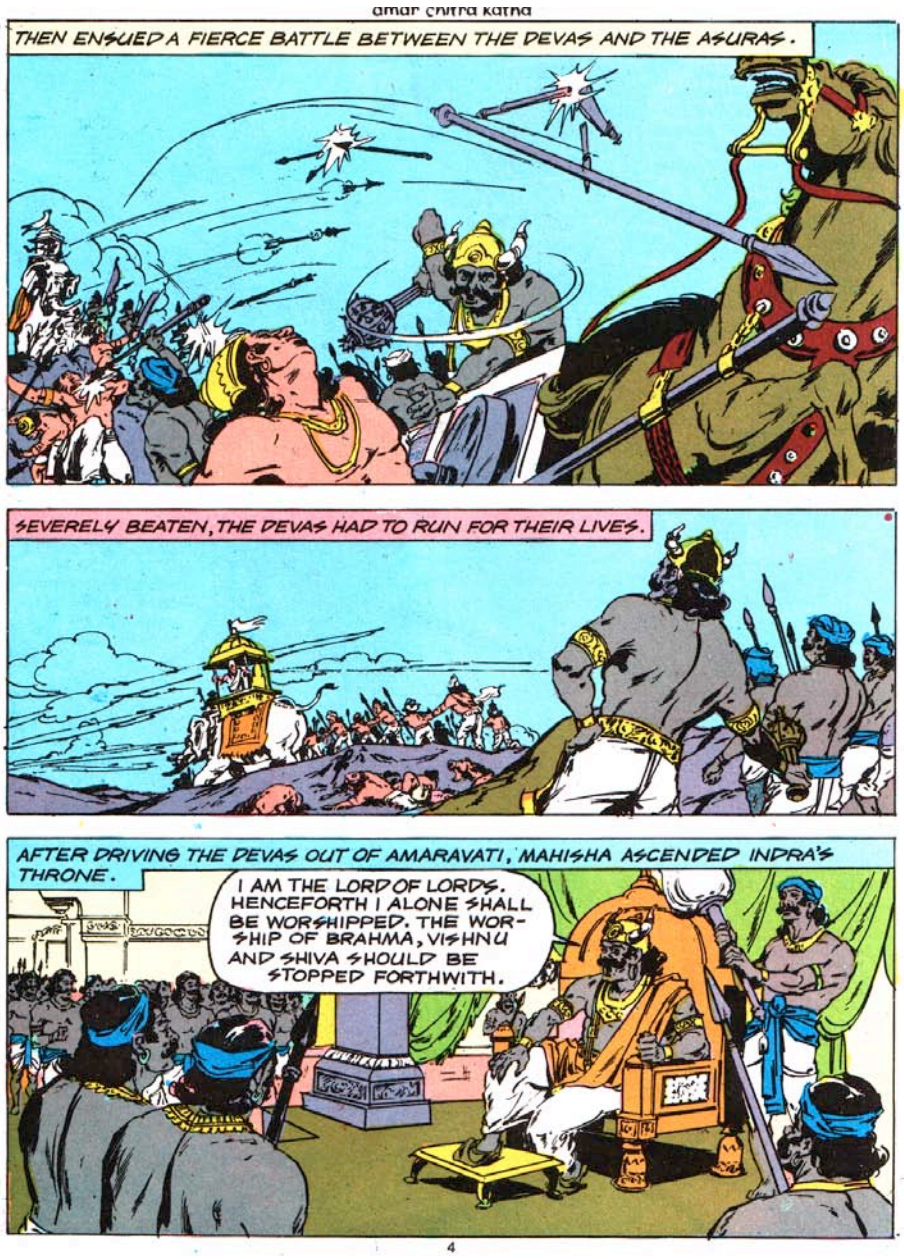

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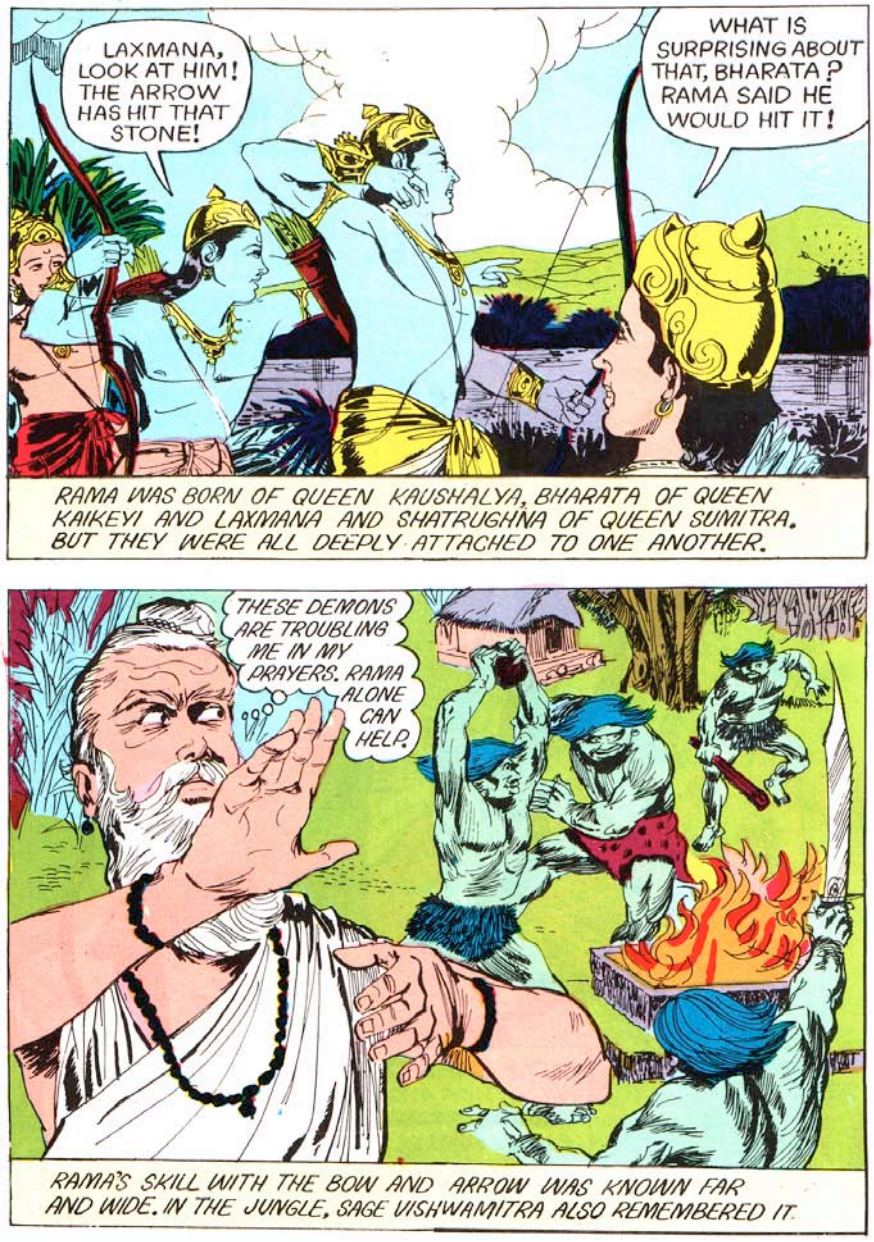

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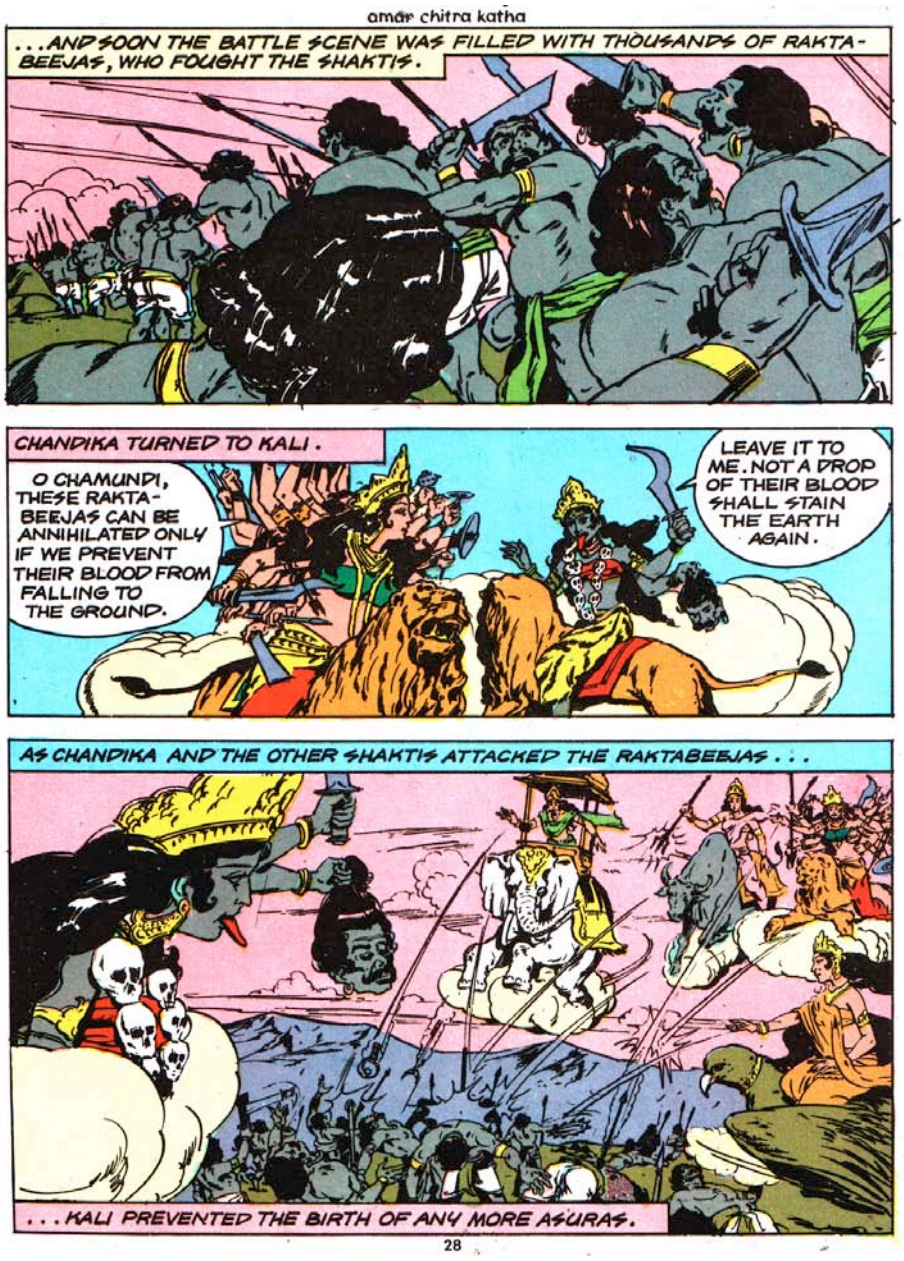

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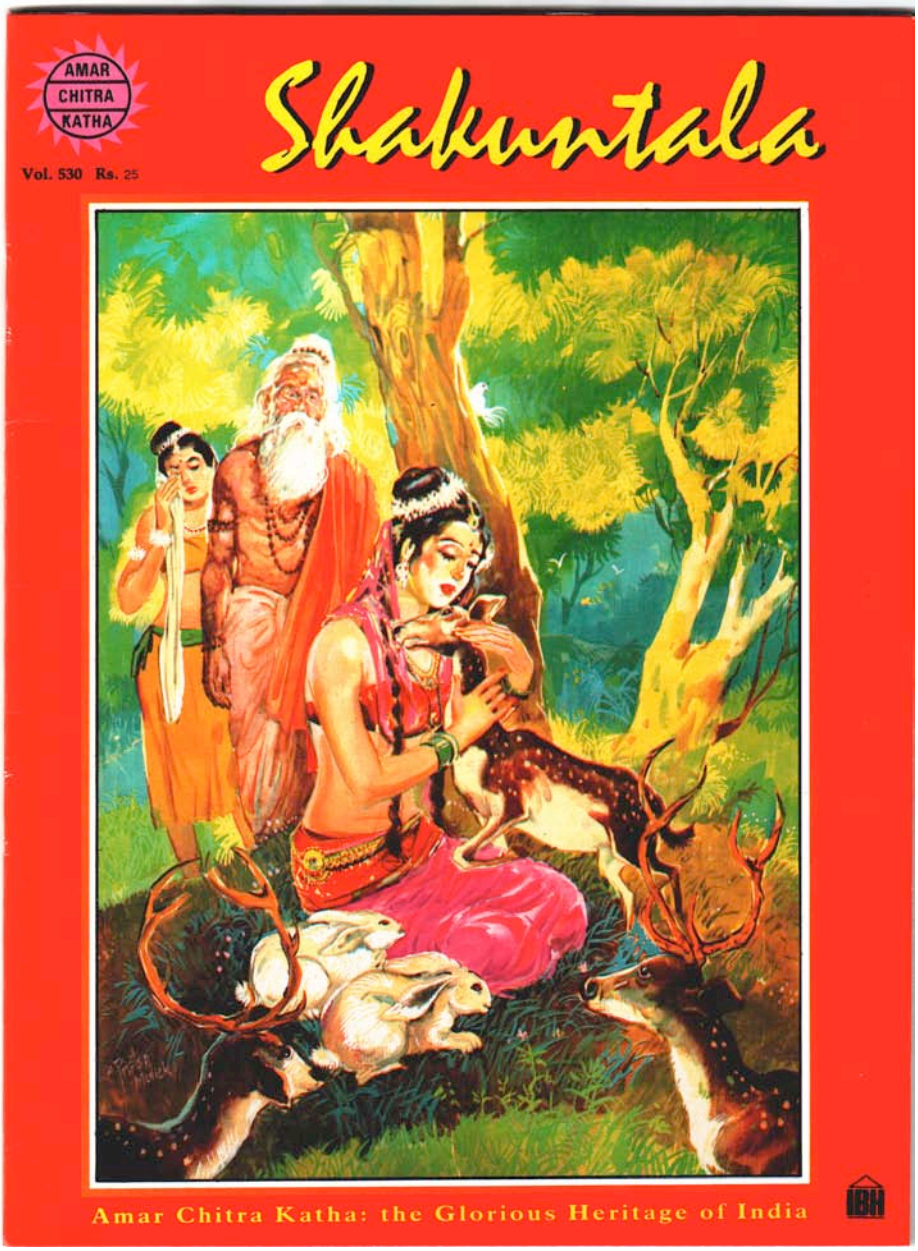

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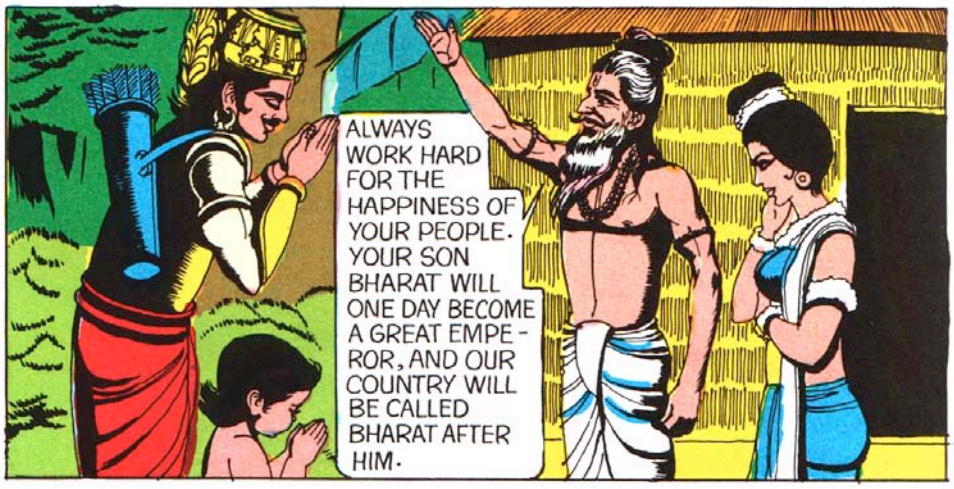

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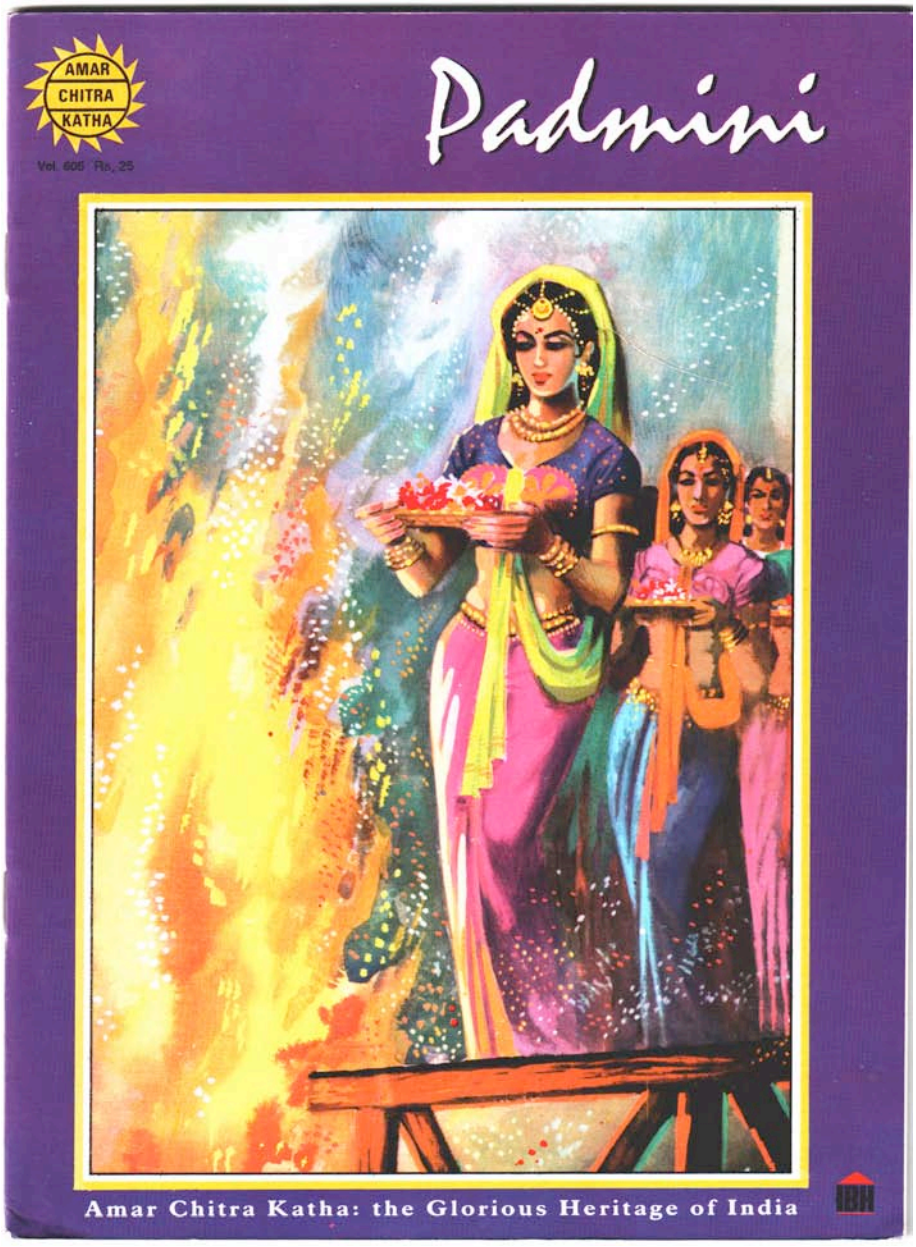

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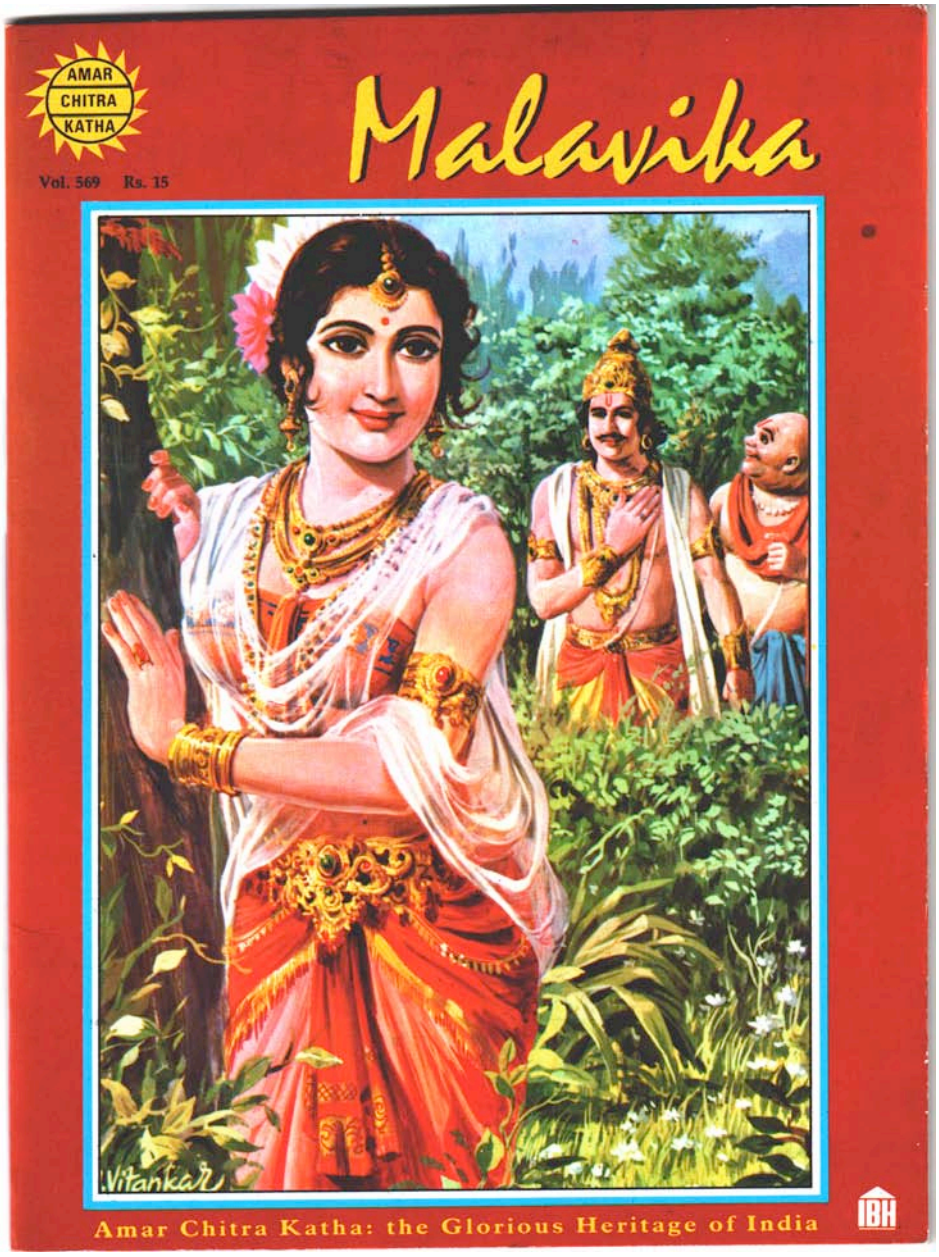

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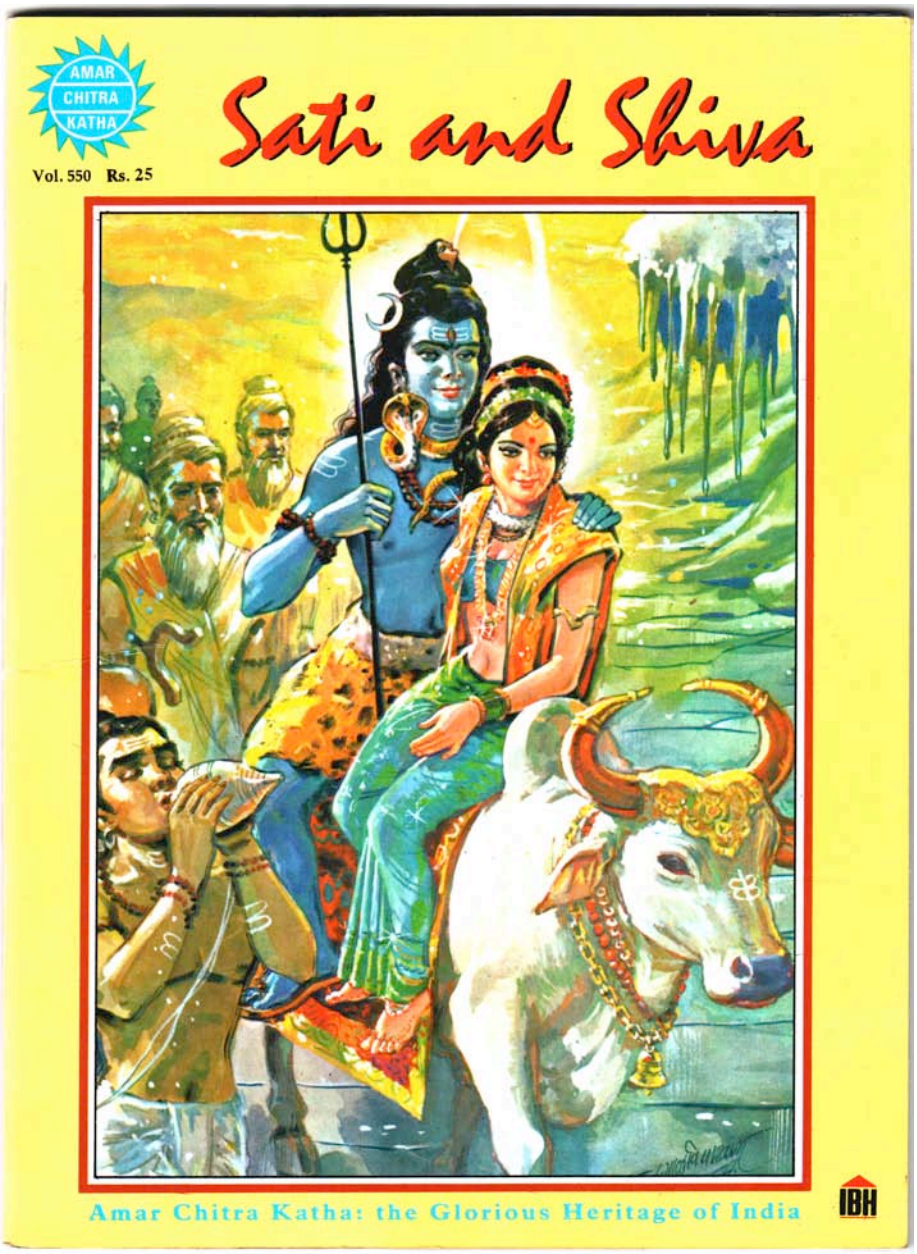

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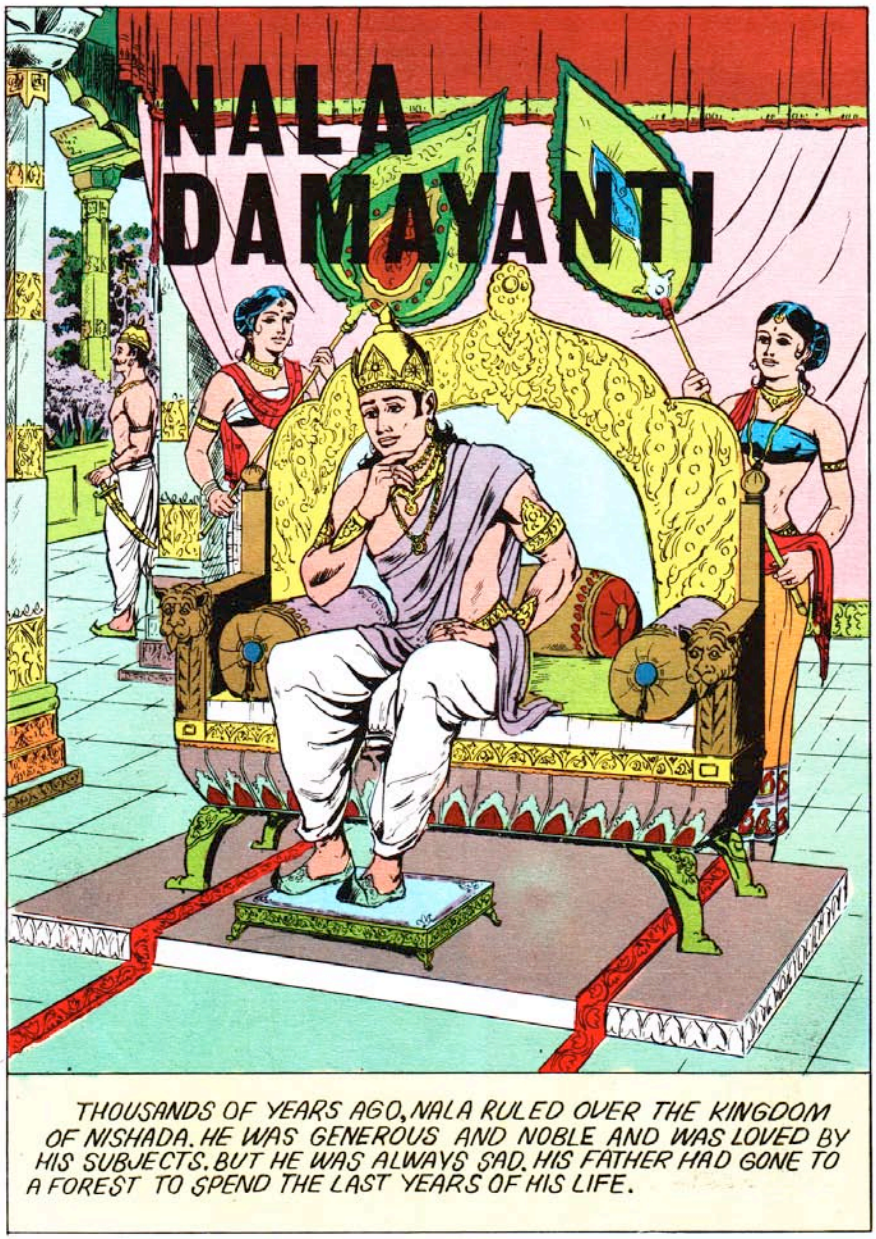

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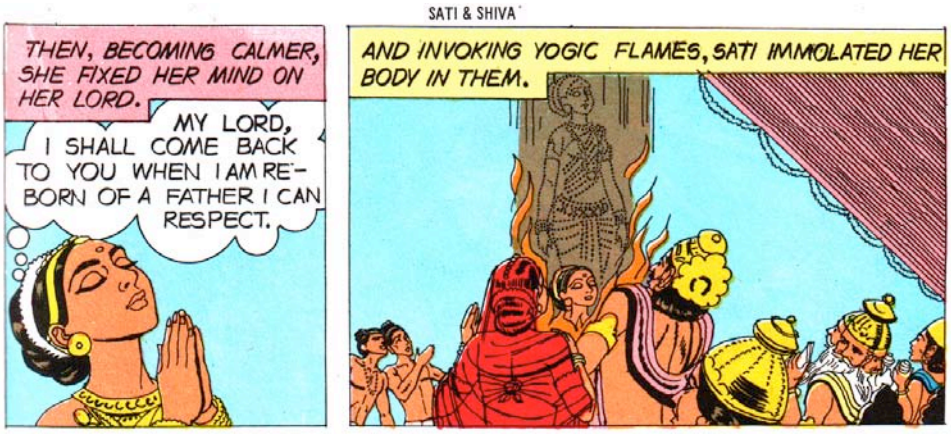

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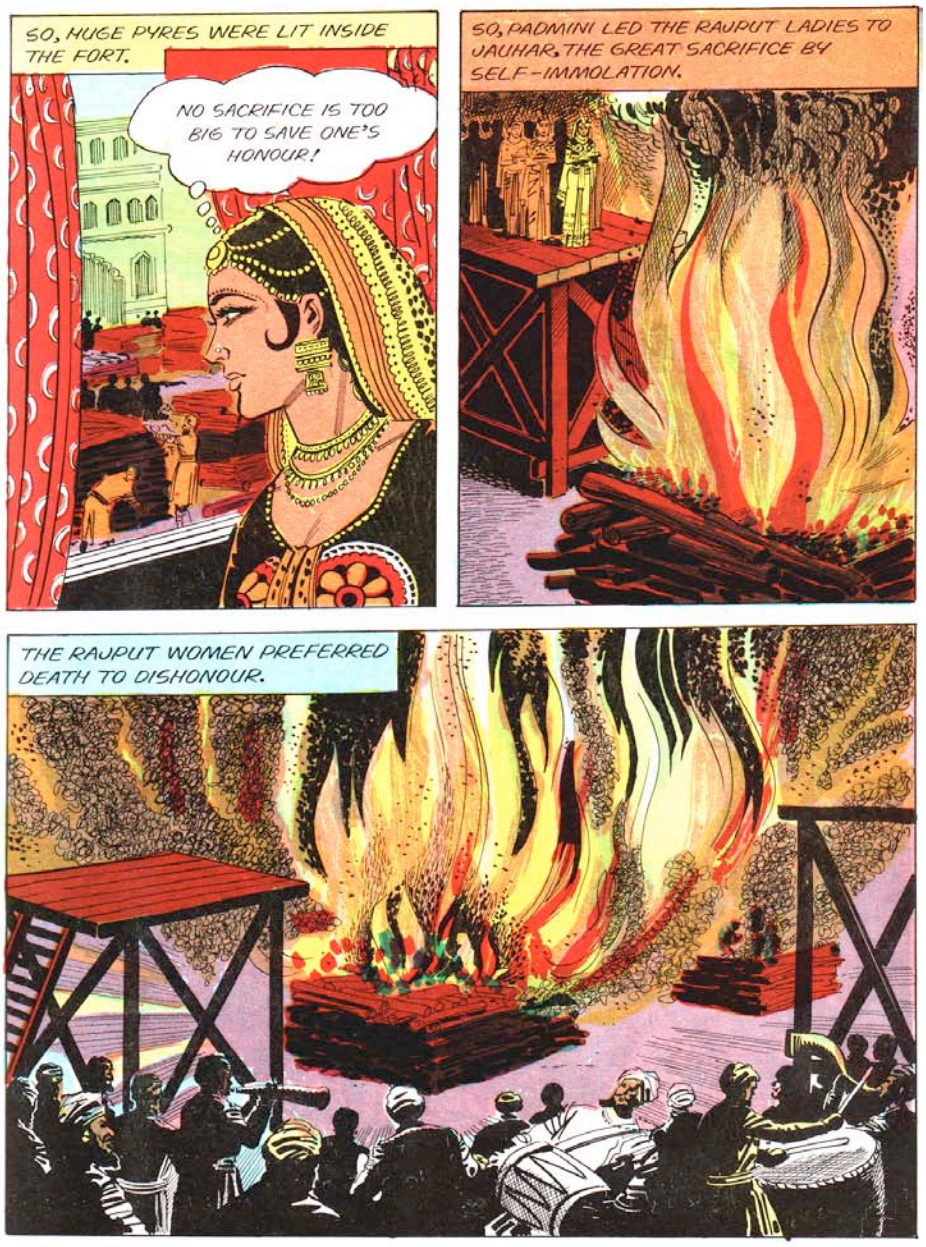

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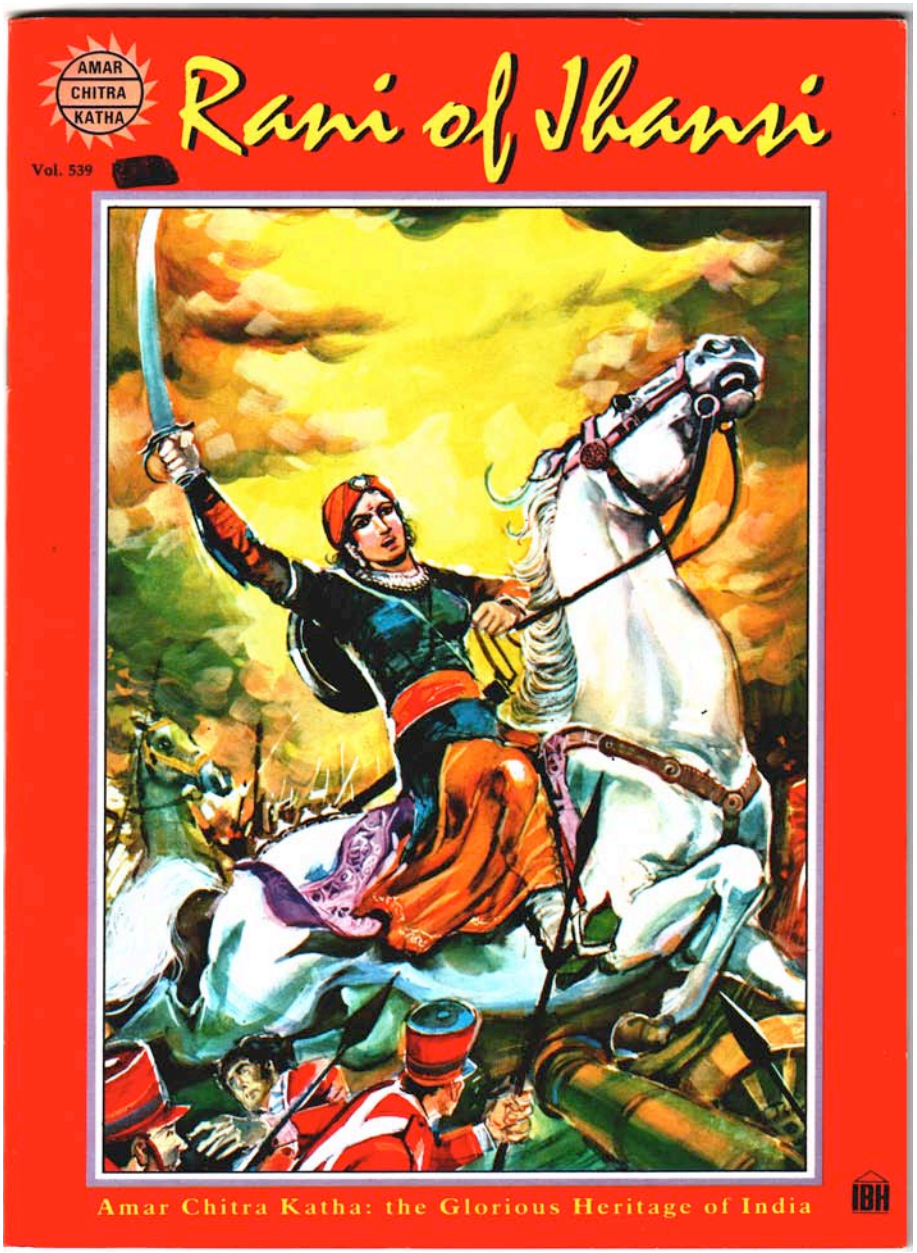

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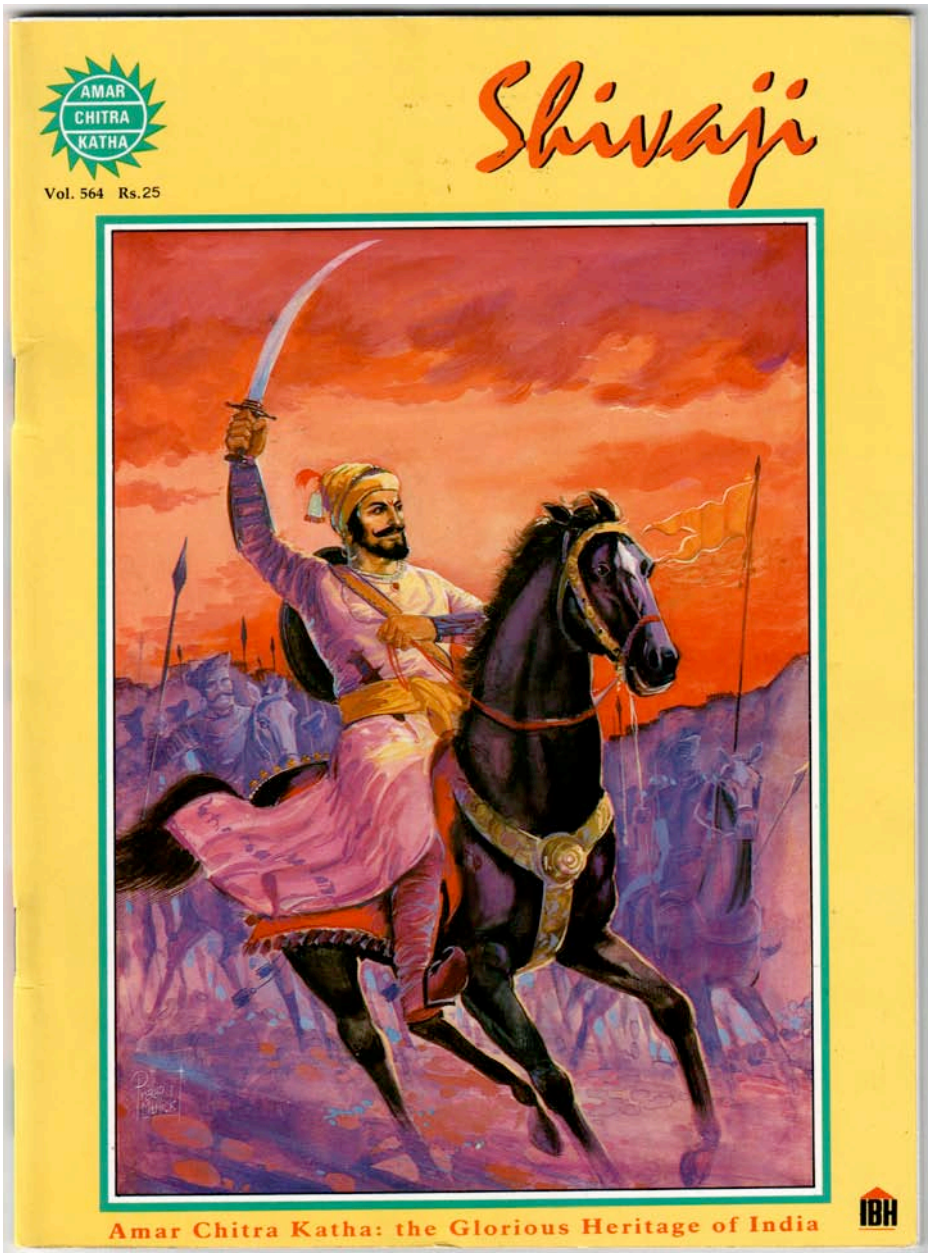

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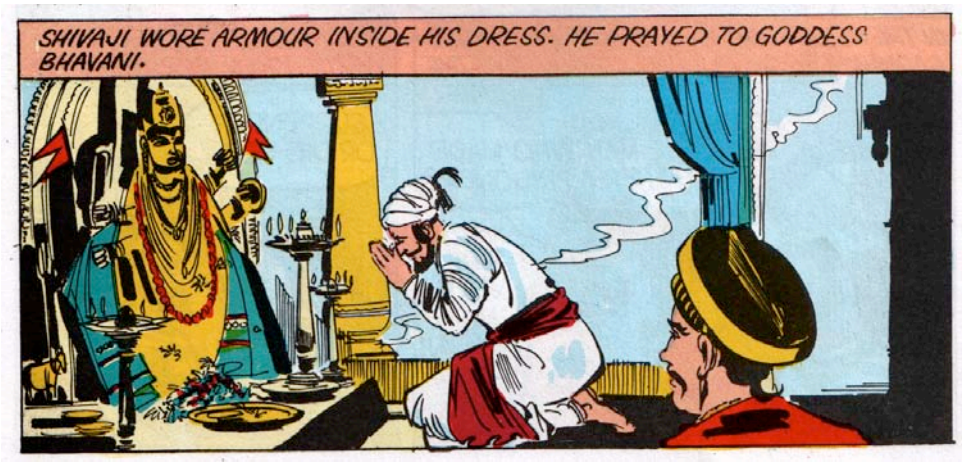

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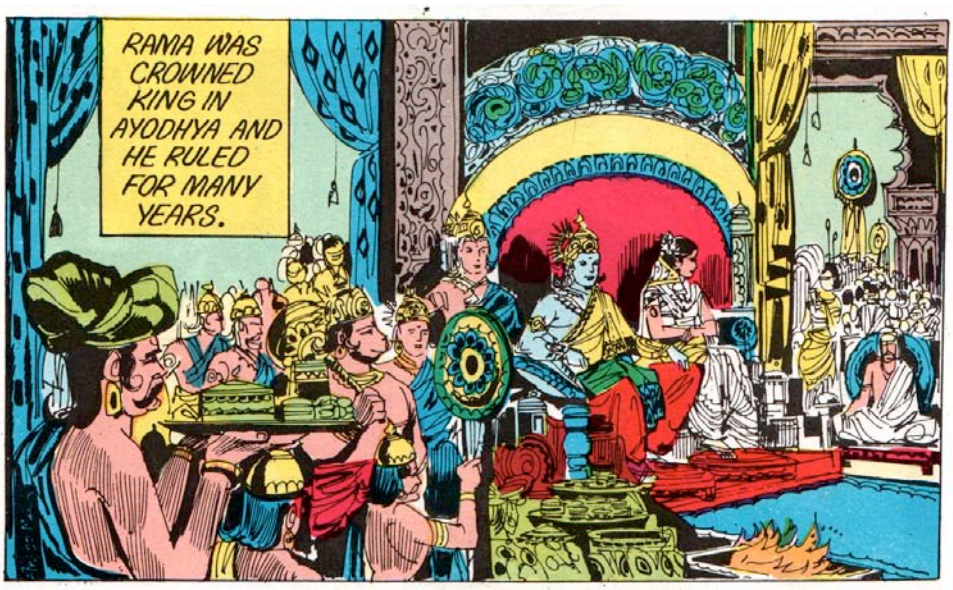

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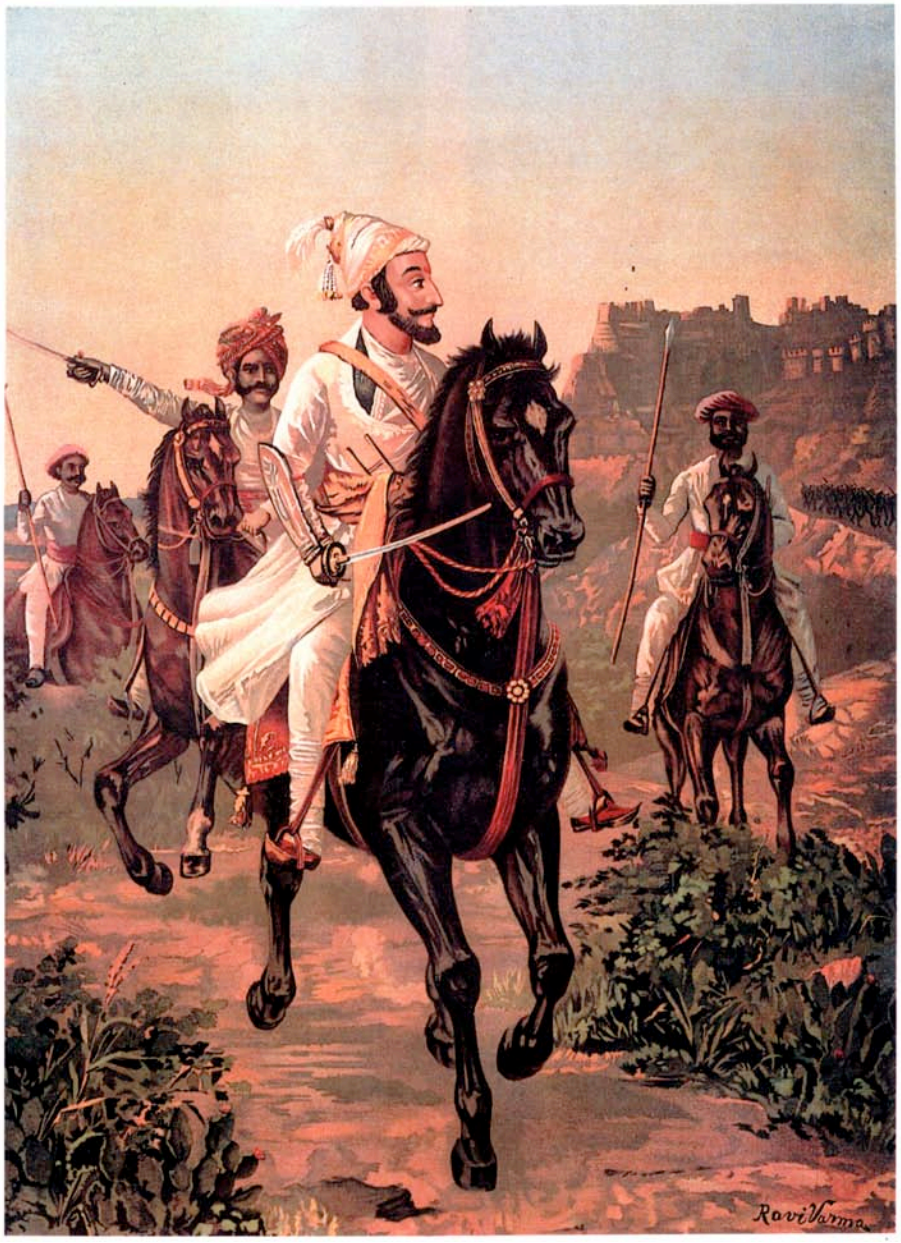
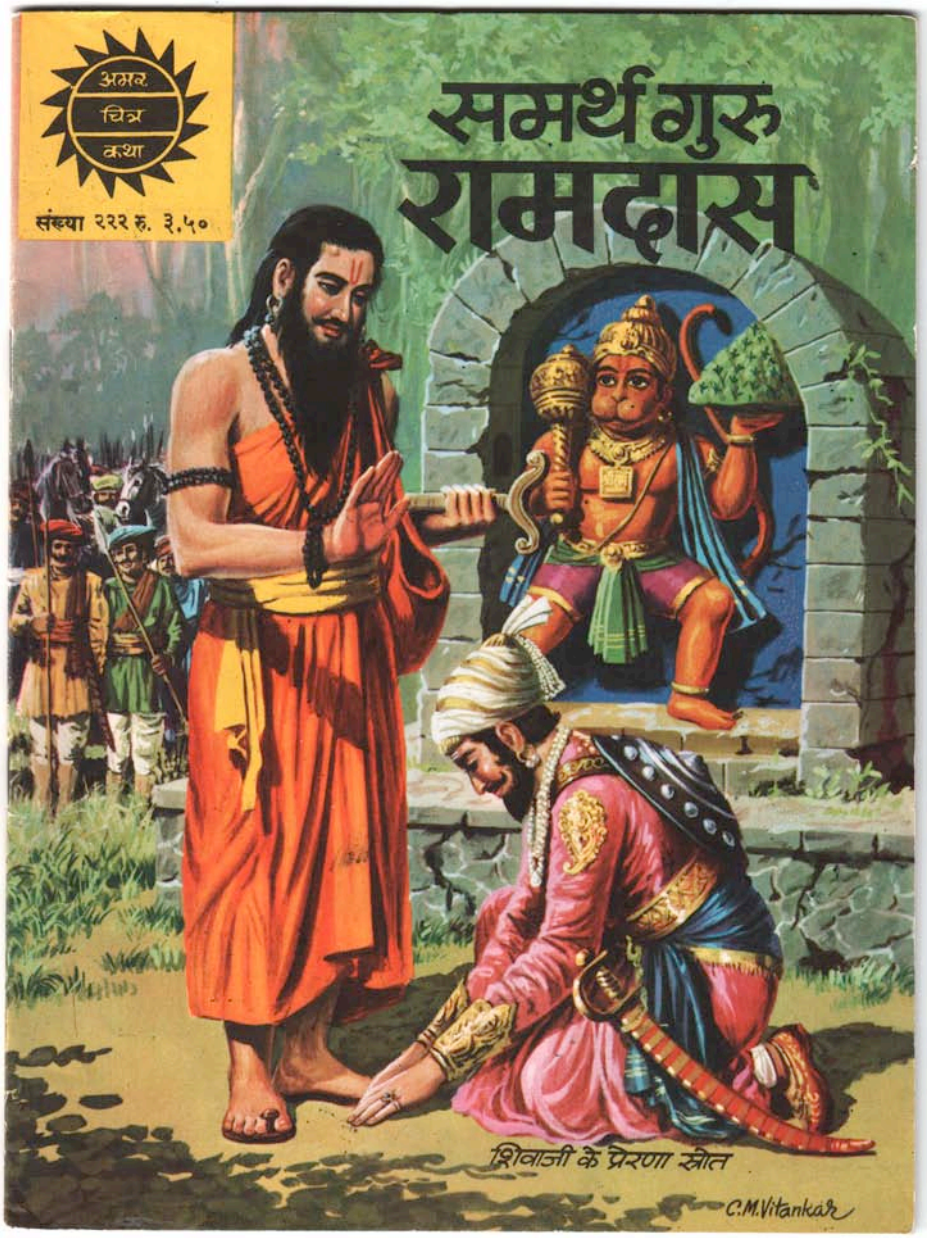
4.8: Shivaji Statue, Shivaji Park, Mumbai. Photographed by the author.



4.9: “Shivaji Maharaj”/ “Chhatrapati Shivaji,” oleograph by The Ravi Varma Lithographic Press (circa 1896). Artist: Ravi Varma.



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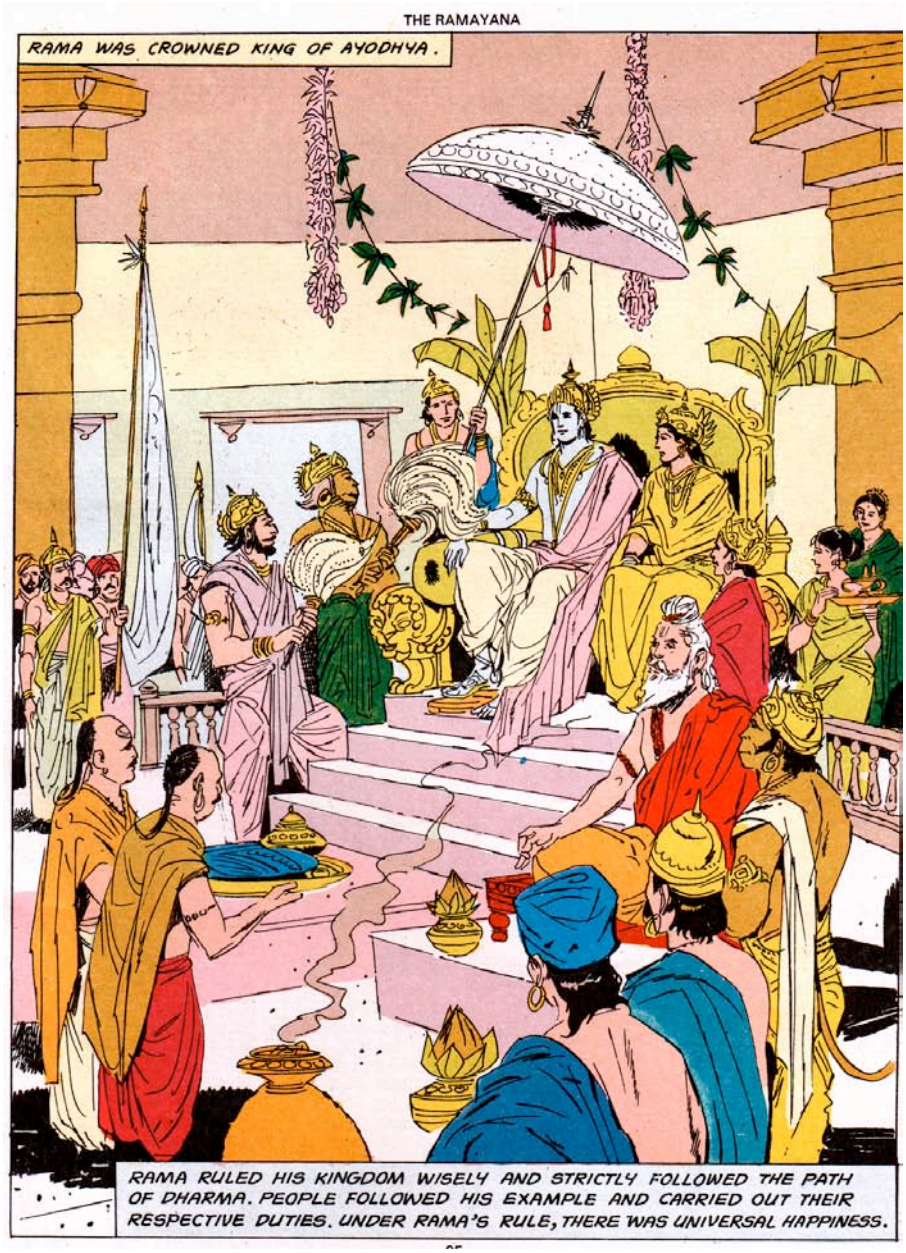

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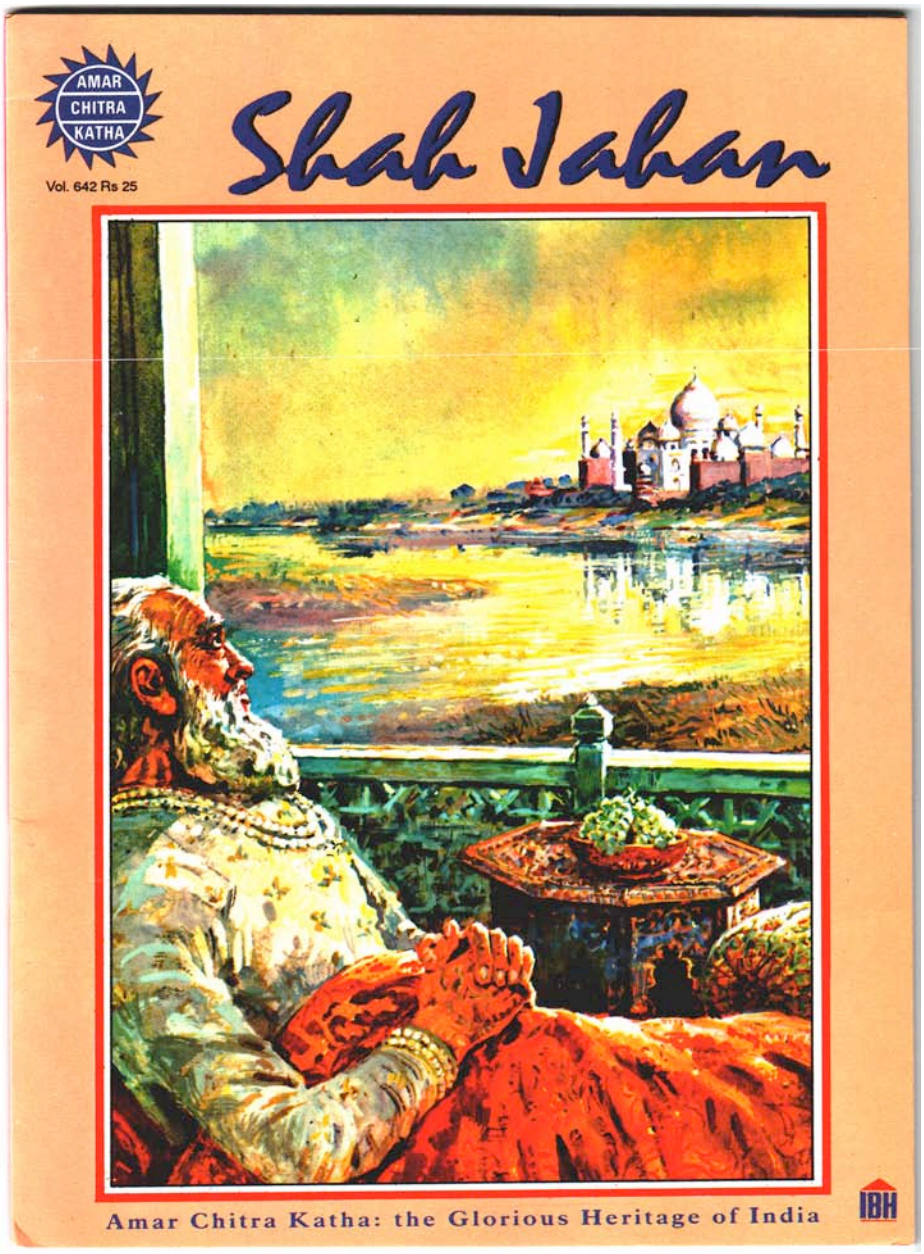

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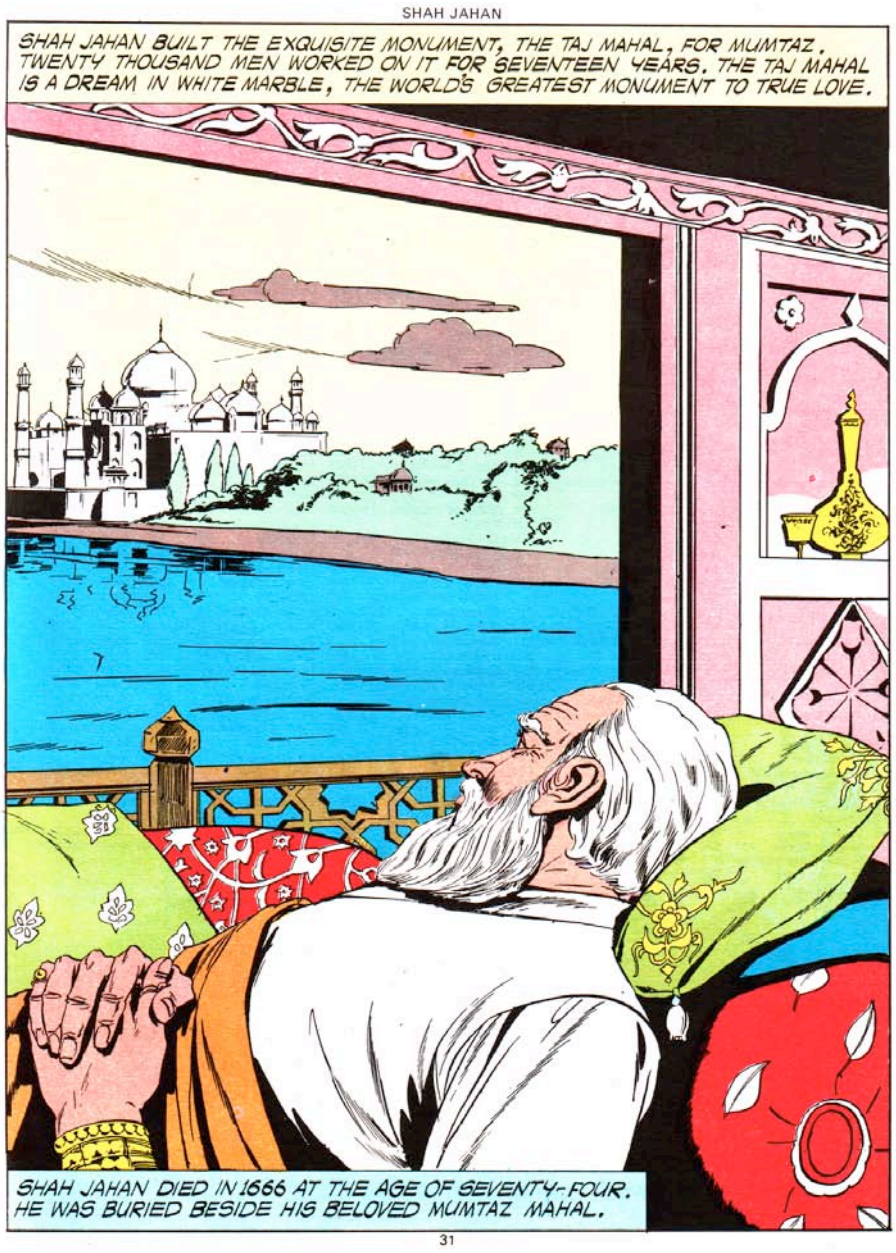

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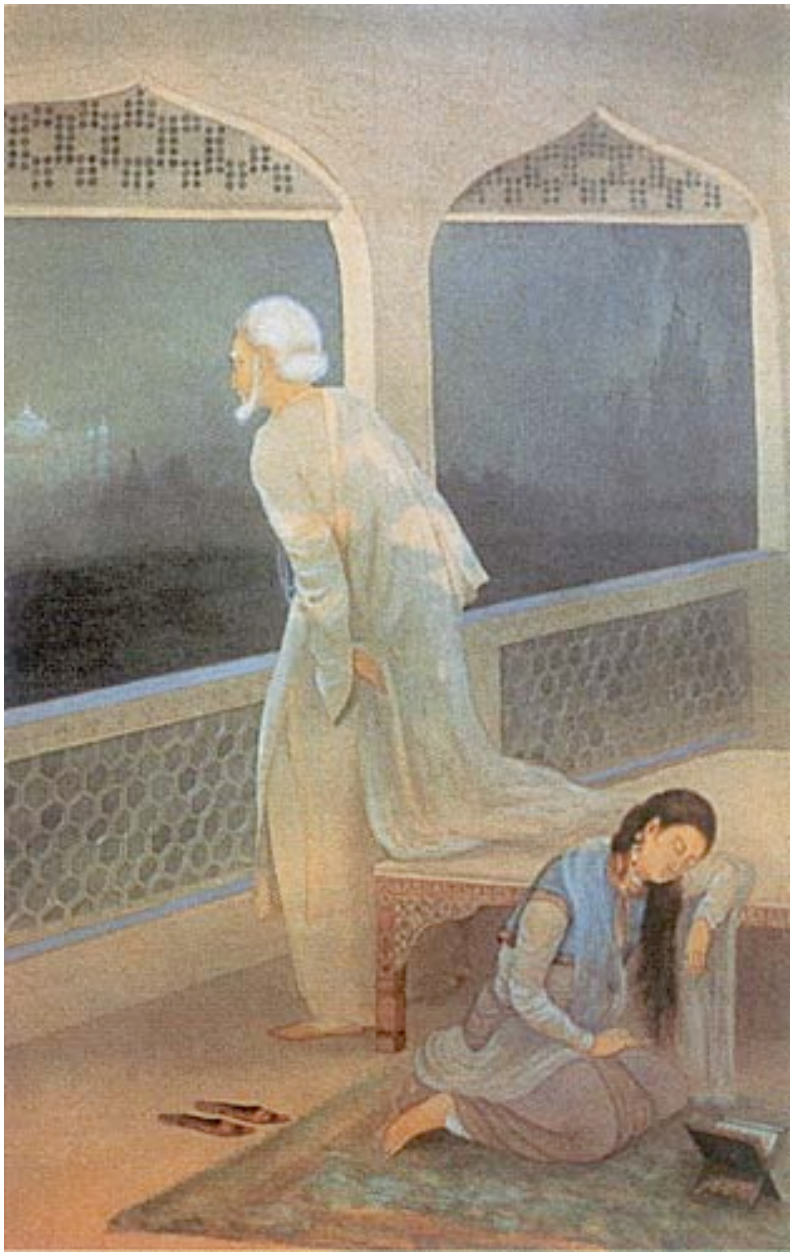
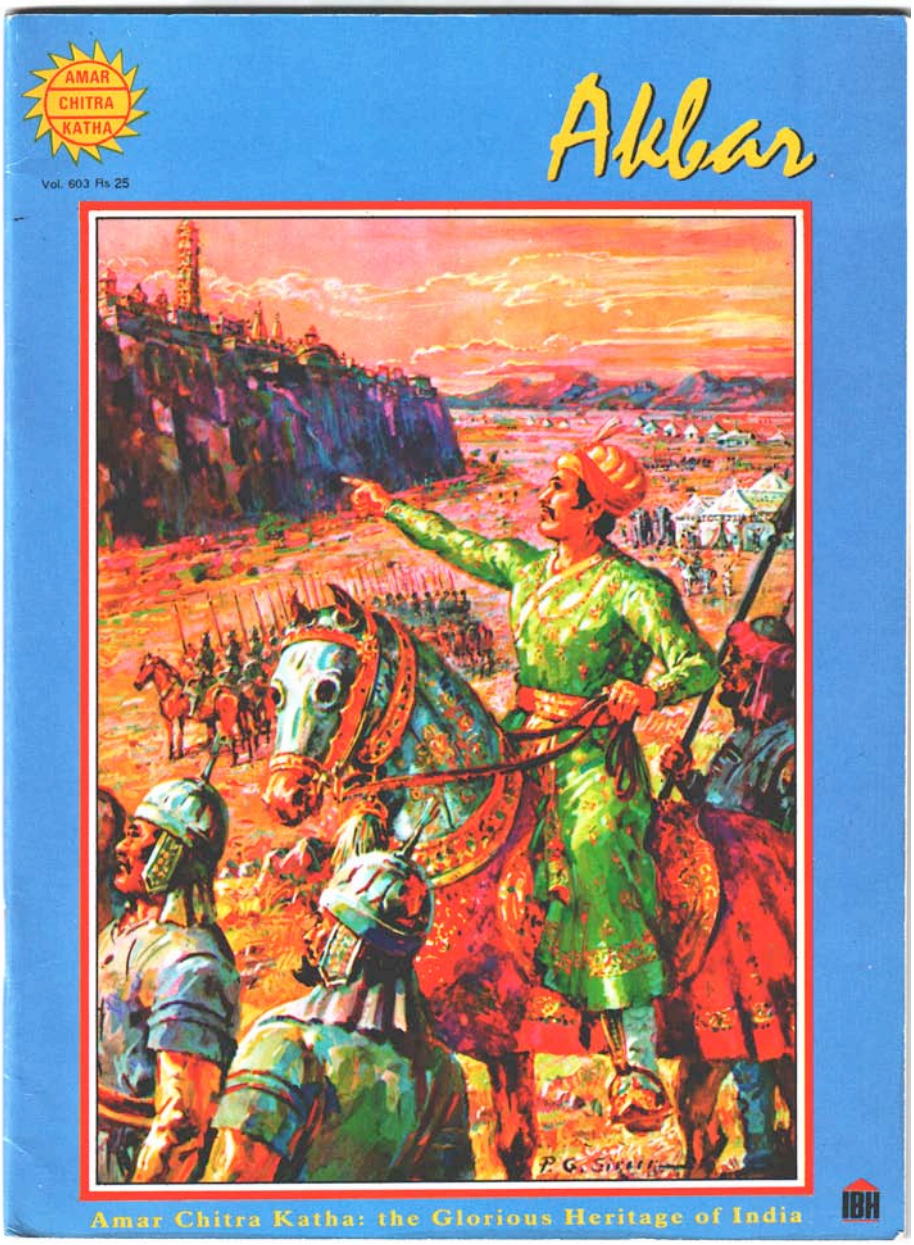


5.4: “Shah Jahan Looking at the Taj,” by A.R. Chughtai. Watercolor, ca. 1922. Courtesy Osian’s (Mumbai).



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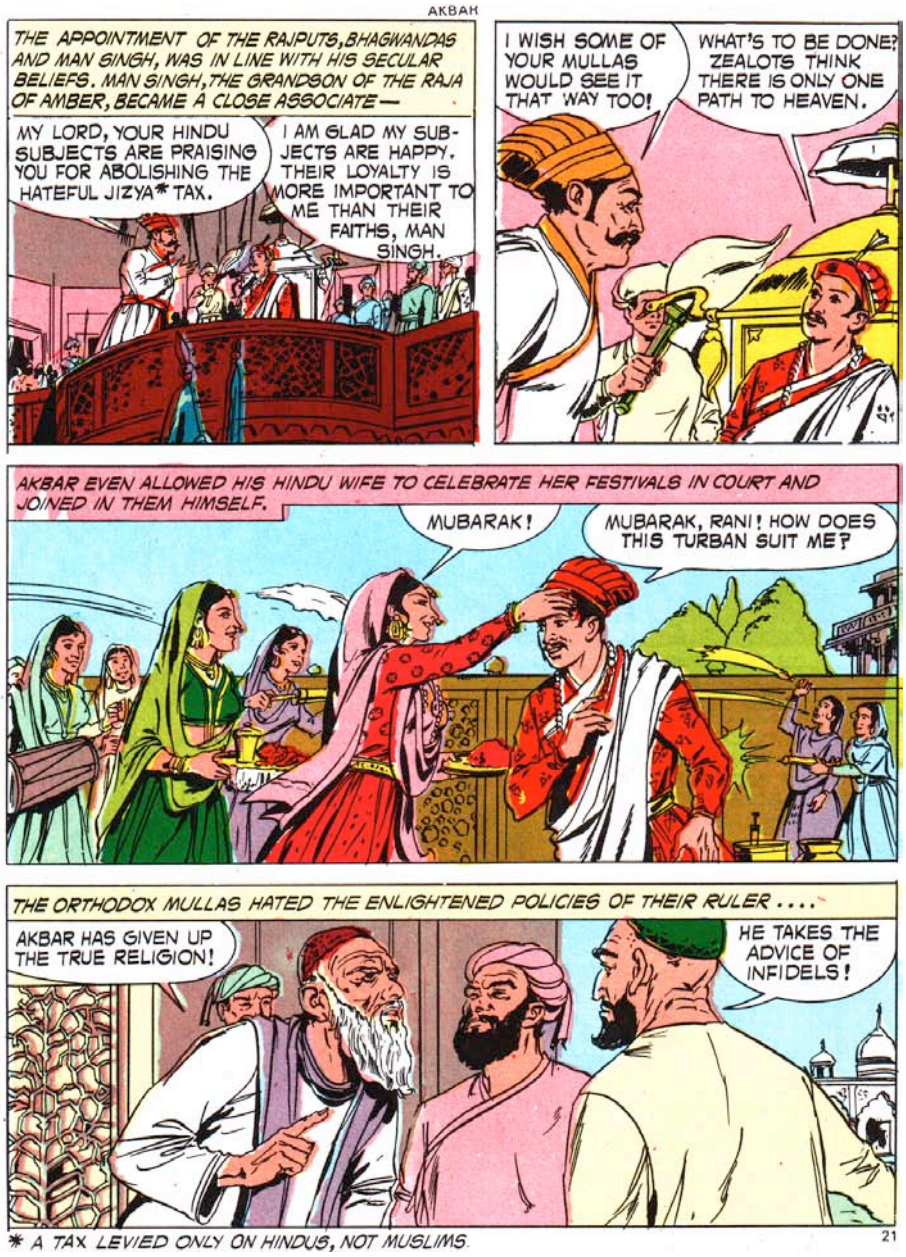
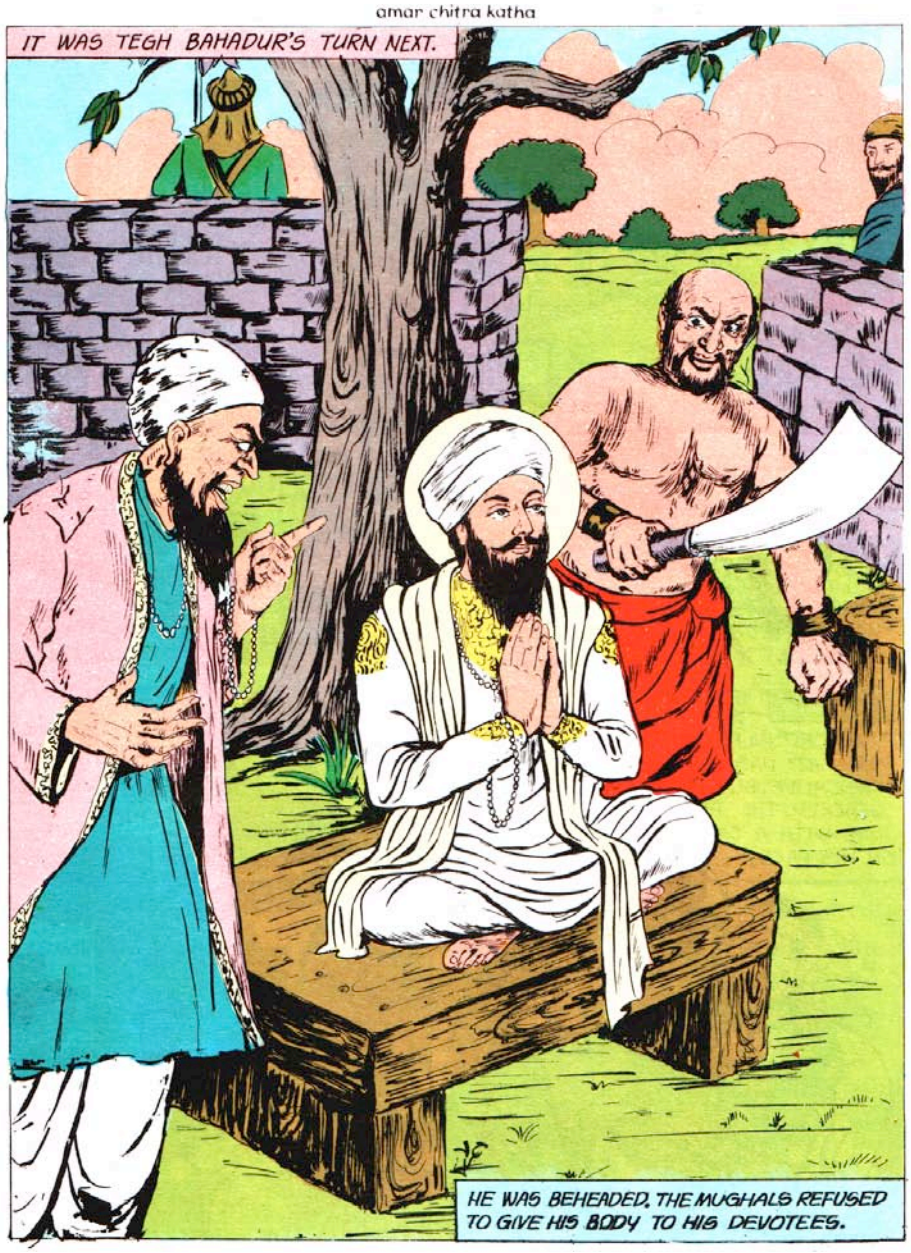
5.6: *Akbar*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 603 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2000 [1979]), 7. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.



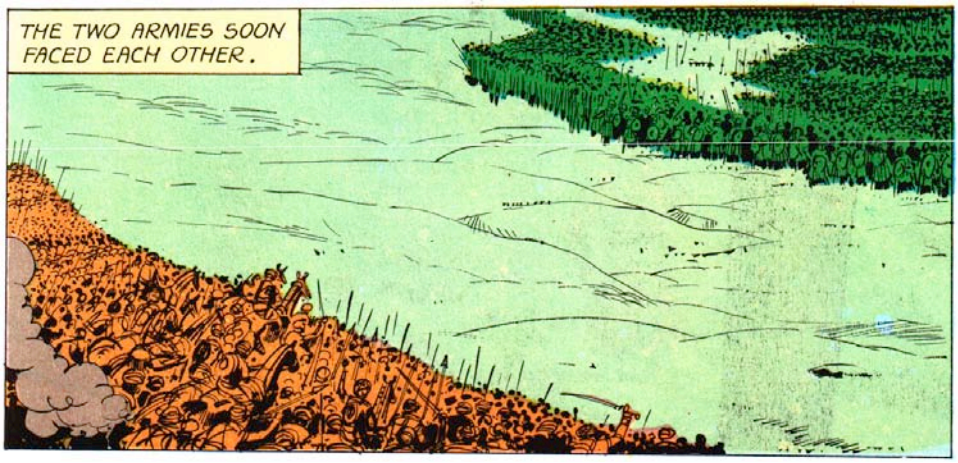
5.7: *Akbar*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 603 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2000 [1979]), 21. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

5.8: *Akbar*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 603 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2000 [1979]), 32. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

5.9: *Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 232 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1981), cover. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

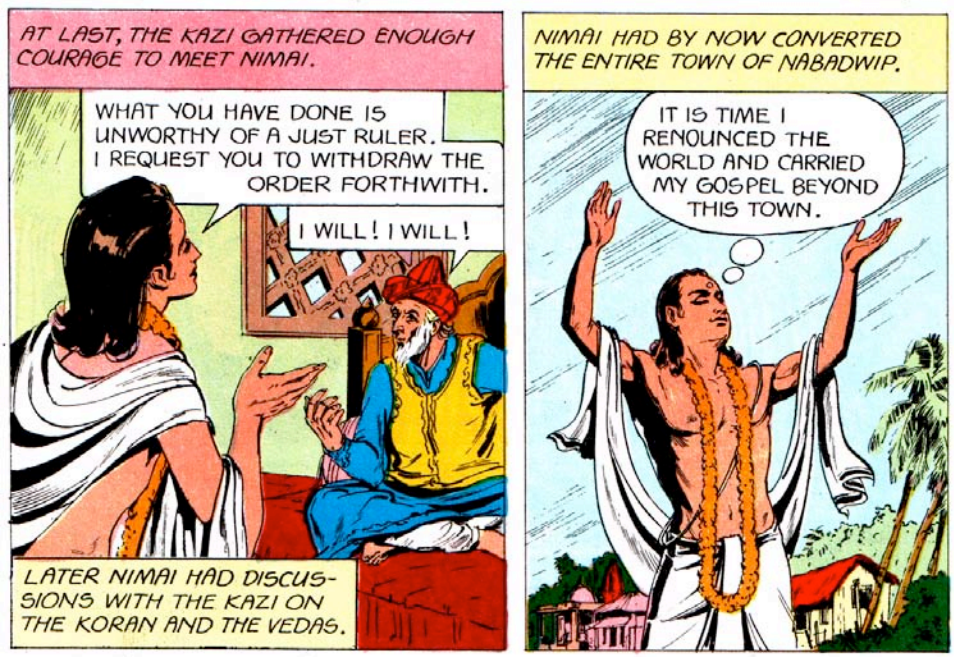


5.10: *Guru Tegh Bahadur*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 694 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1999 [1976]), 28. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

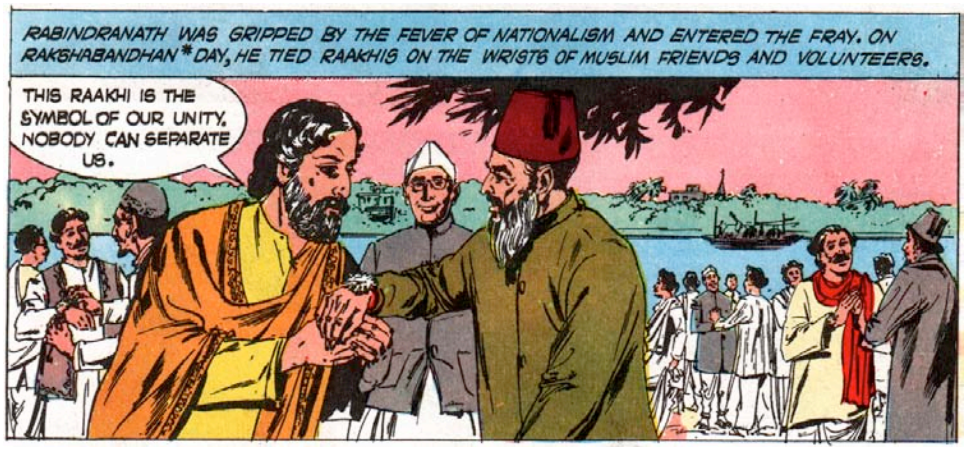


5.11: *Rana Sanga*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 630 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2000 [1976]), 29. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

5.12: *Amar Singh Rathor*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 681 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1999 [1978]), 24. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.



5.13: *Chaitanya Mahaprabhu*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 631 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2000 [1975]), 24. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

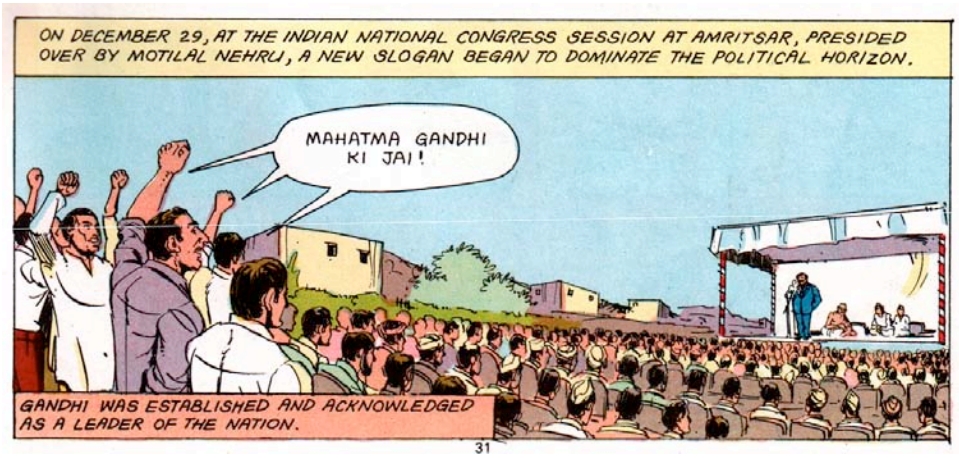


6.1: *Rabindranath Tagore*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 548, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1996 [1977]), 21. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

6.2: *Subhas Chandra Bose*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 544, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2000 [1975]), 10-11. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

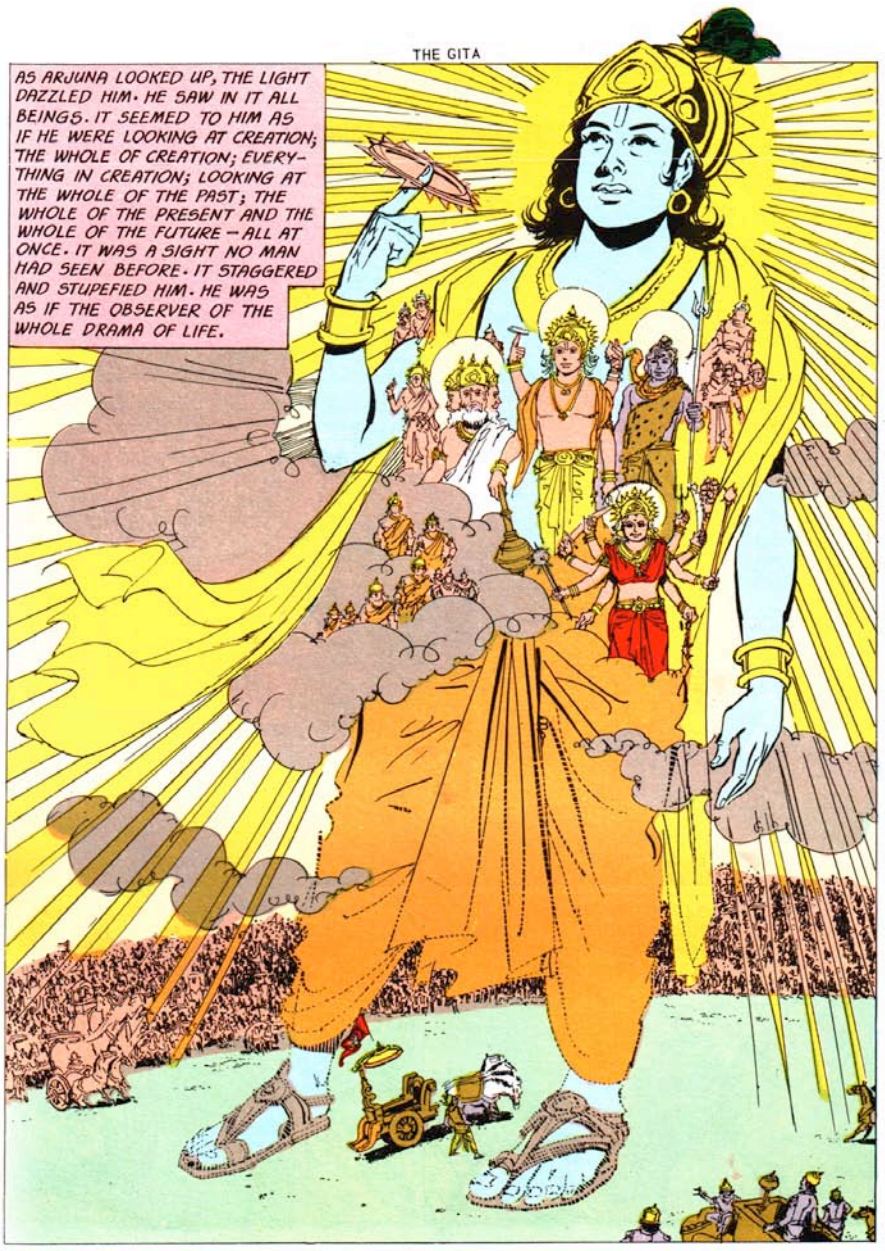
6.3: *Rani Durgavati*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no, 606, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2000 [1976]), 20. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

6.4: *Rabindranath Tagore*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 548, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1996 [1977]), 28. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

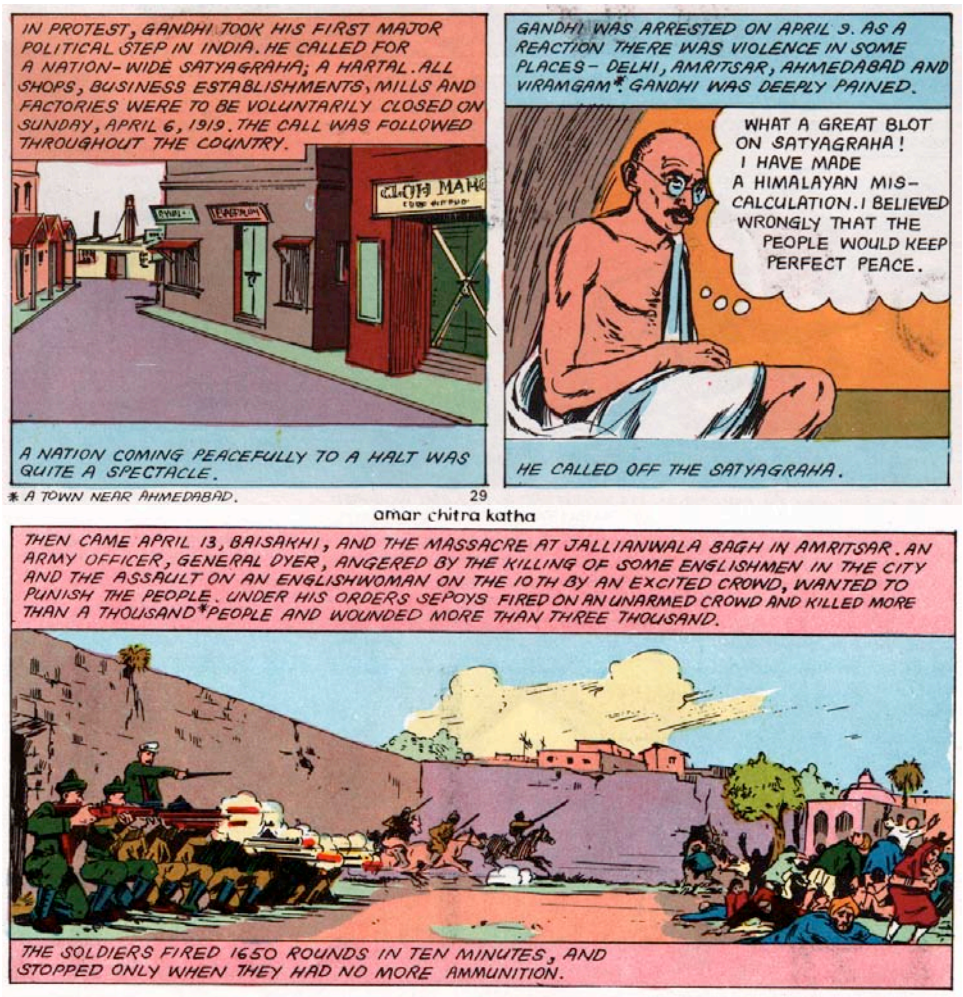


6.5: *Mahatma Gandhi I*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 650, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2000 [1989]), 31. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

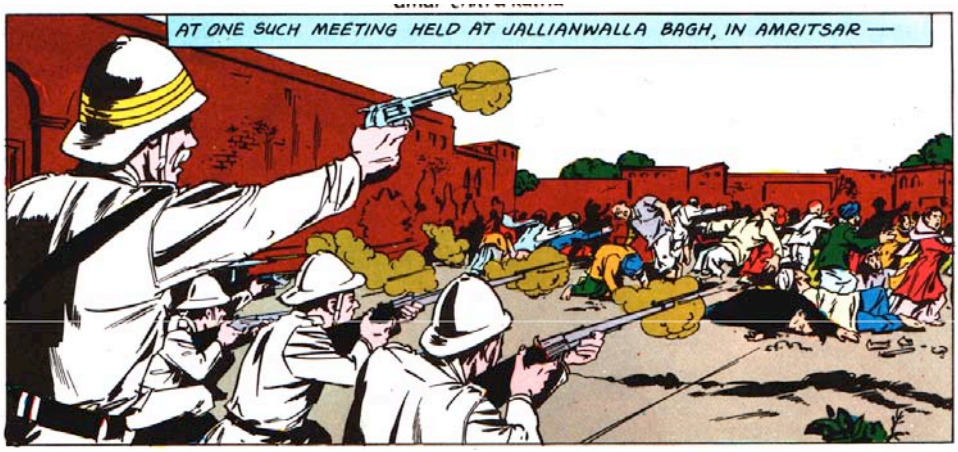
6.6: *Subhas Chandra Bose*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 544, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2000 [1975]), cover. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.



6.7: *The Gita*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 505, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1999 [1977]), 27. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

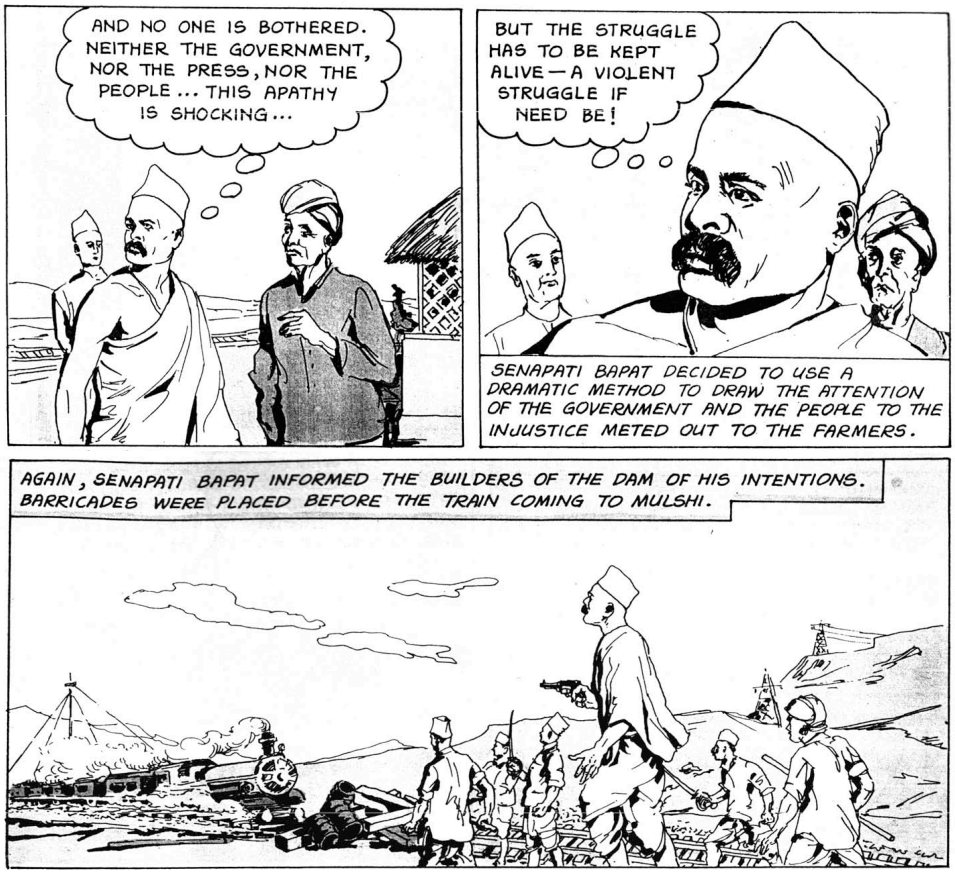


6.8: *Mahatma Gandhi I*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 650, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2000 [1989]), 29-30. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.



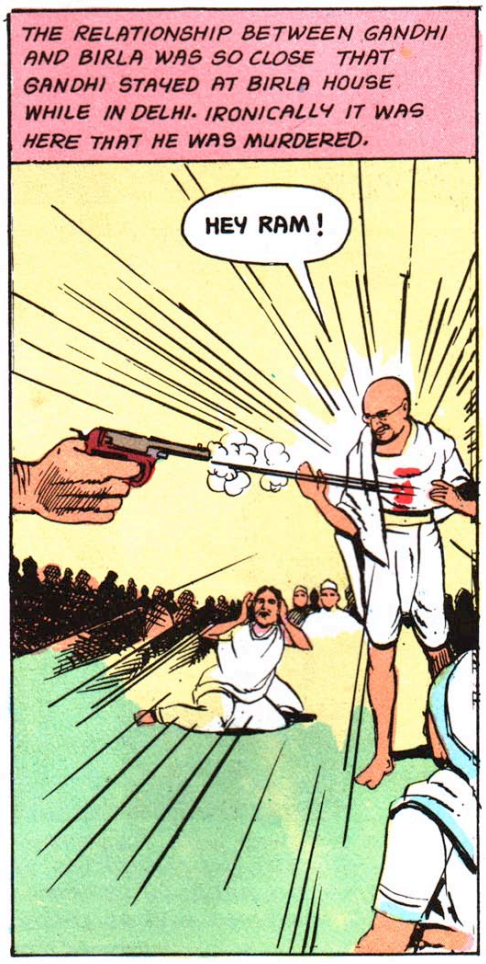
6.9: *Bhagat Singh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 608, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1998 [1981]), 6. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

6.10: *Jallianwala Bagh*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 358, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1986), cover. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

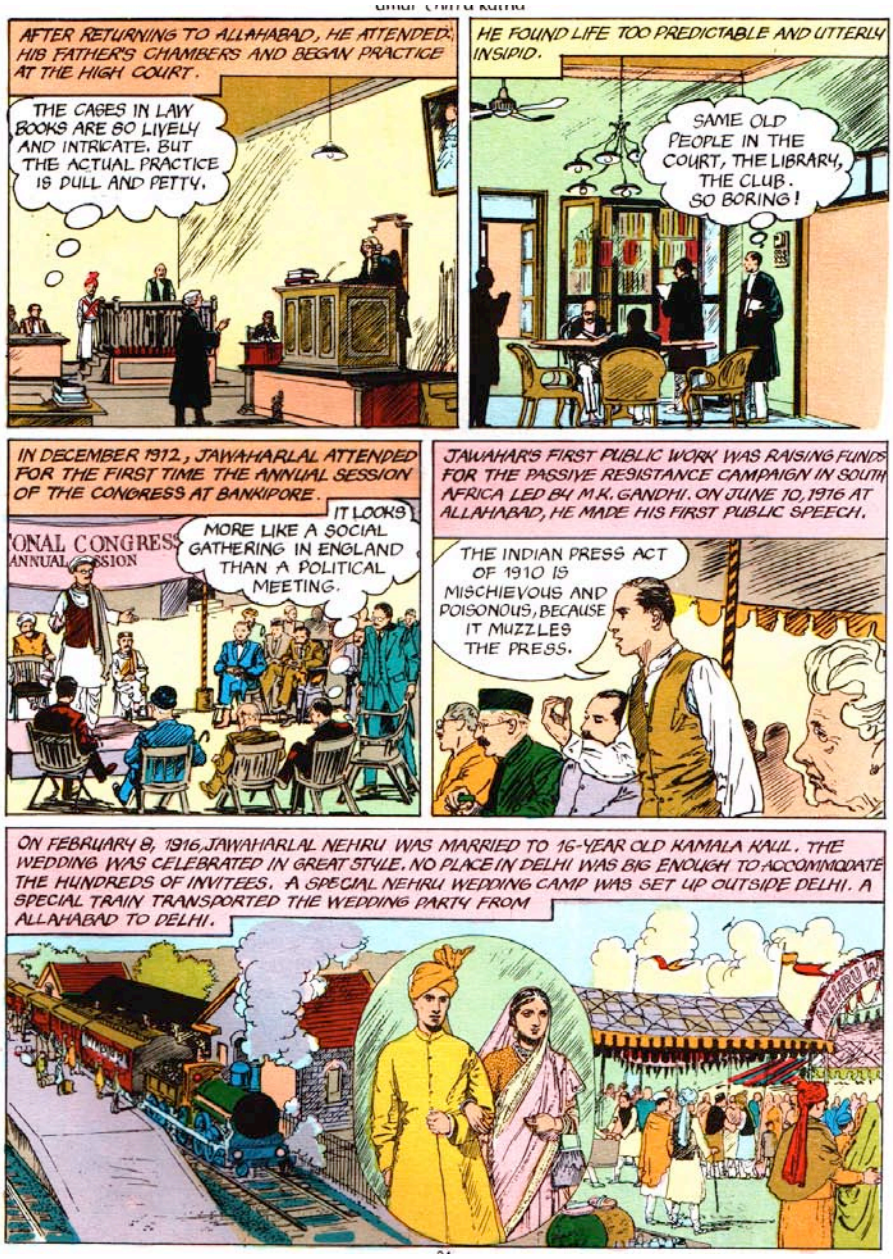


6.11: *Senapati Bapat*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 303, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1984), 26-7. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

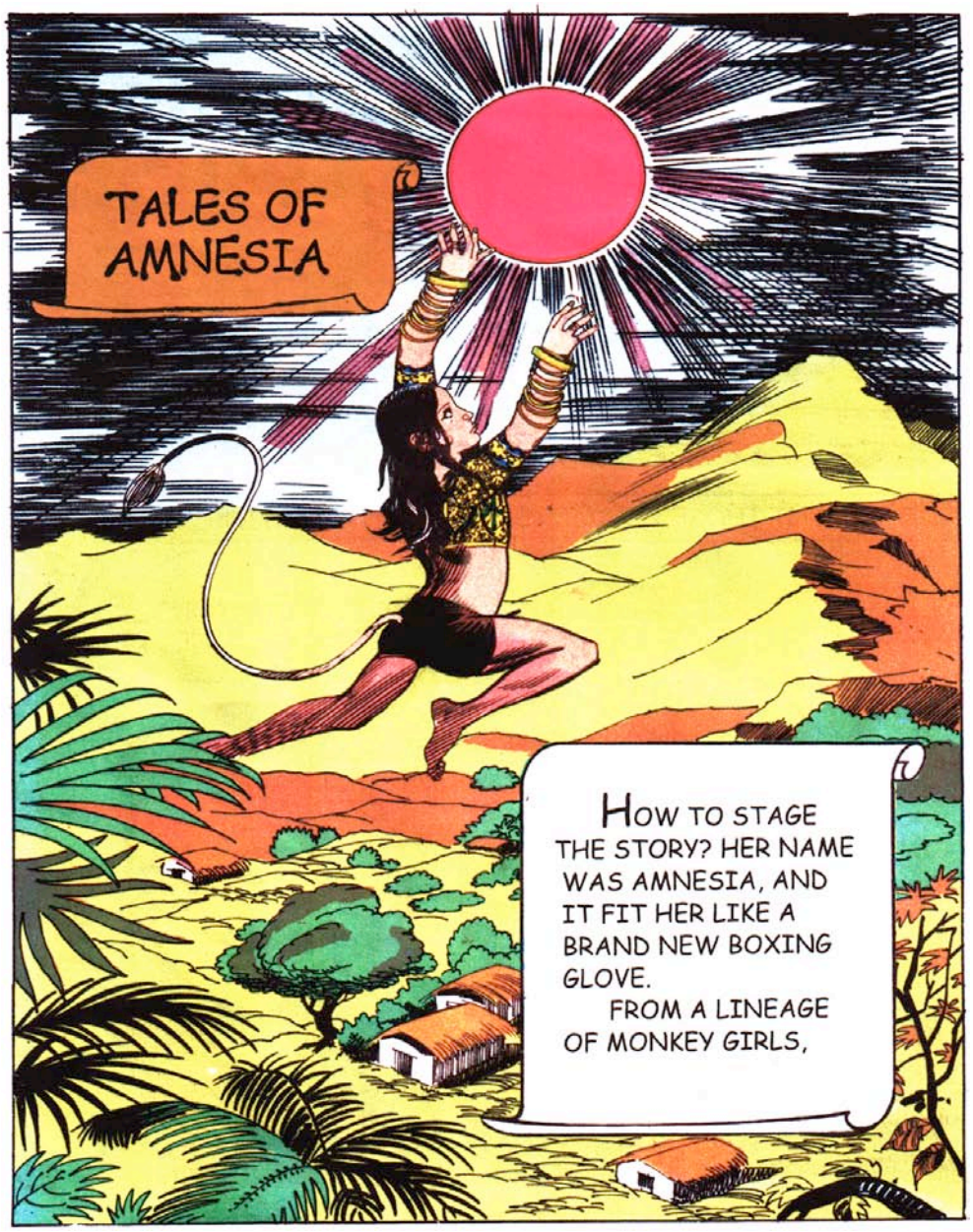
6.12: *Mahatma Gandhi II*, *Amar Chitra Katha,* no. 416, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1989), 28. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.



6.13: *G.D. Birla*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 733, (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2001 [1987]), 29. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.



7.1: *Jawaharlal Nehru*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 700 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1999 [1991]), 24. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

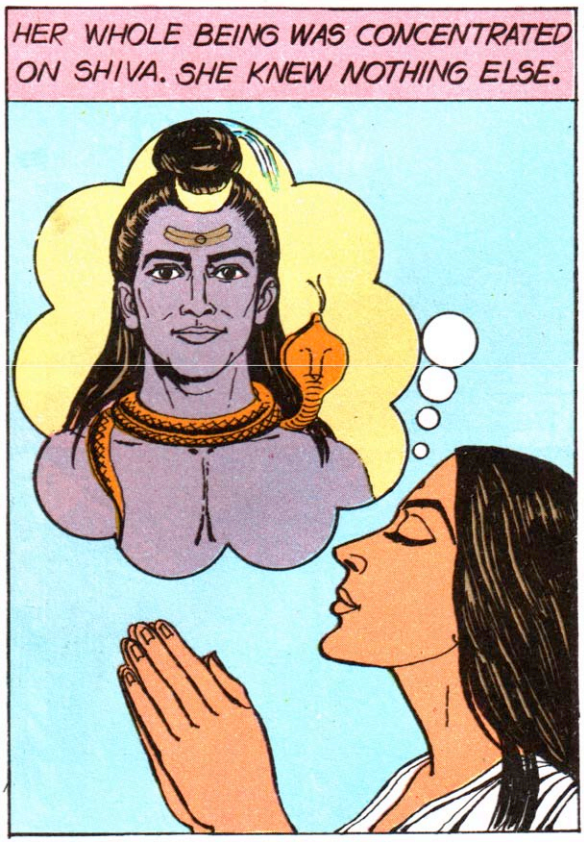


7.2: *Tales of Amnesia*, Chitra Ganesh (2002), cover. Courtesy of Chitra Ganesh.

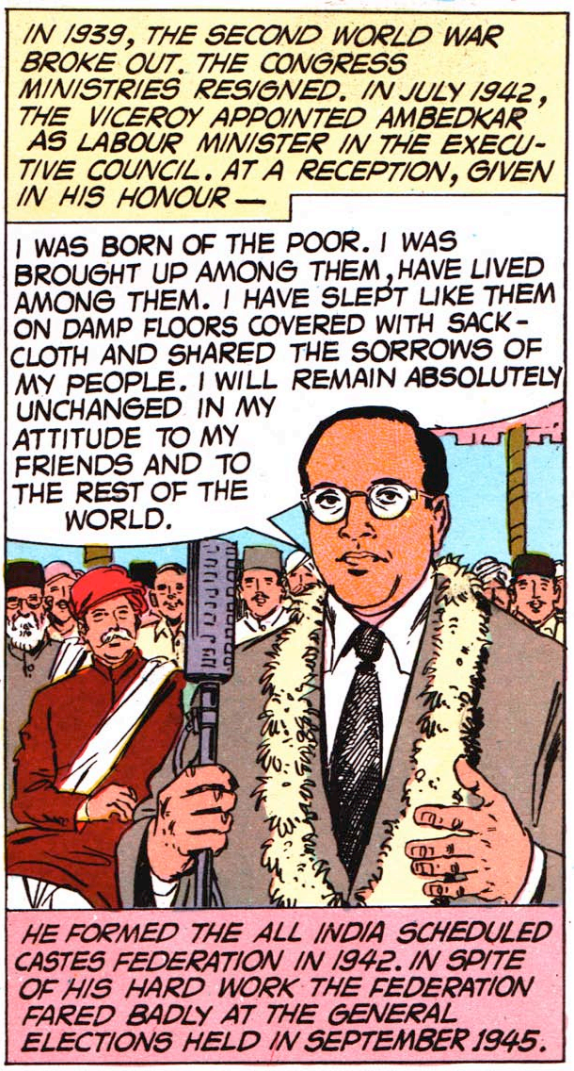
7.3: *Tales of Amnesia*, Chitra Ganesh (2002), 11. Courtesy of Chitra Ganesh.

7.4: *Vasavadatta*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 674 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1998 [1972]), 18. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

7.5: *Malavika*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 569 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1994 [1976]), 14. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.



7.6: *Sati and Shiva*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 550 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2000 [1976]), 3. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.



7.7: *Babasaheb Ambedkar*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 611 (Bombay: India Book House Pvt. Ltd., 1996 [1979]), 28. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher India Book House Pvt Ltd, Mumbai.

Appendix: Chronological List of *Amar Chitra Katha* Issues

Note: The numbering of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series begins with the first issue, *Krishna*, no. 11. There are no issues assigned numbers 1 to 10. The year of publication and the names of the author, artist, and cover artist are listed below when known; often no credit was given inside the comic books to the authors or artists, nor was a publication date included, so I have pieced this information together from the incomplete record at India Book House and through my interviews with the comic book producers.

Year:	Issue No.:	Title:		Deluxe Edition No.:
1969	11	*Krishna*		501
		Script:	Anant Pai	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Yusuf Lien	
1970	12	*Shakuntala*		530
		Script:	Dolat H. Doongaji and A.K. Lavangia	
		Illustrations:	K.P. Shankar	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	13	*The Pandava Princes*		626
		Script:	B.R. Bhagwat	
		Illustrations:	Subhash Tendle	
		Cover:	S. Tendle	
	14	*Savitri*		511
		Script:		
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	15	*Rama*		504
		Script:		
		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
1971	16	*Nala Damayanti*		507
		Script:		
		Illustrations:	Souren Roy	
		Cover:		
	17	*Harischandra*		577
		Script:		
		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:		
	18	*The Sons of Rama*		503
		Script:		
		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	

		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	19	*Hanuman*		502
		Script:	Anant Pai	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
	20	*Mahabharata*		582
		Script:	B.R. Bhagwat	
		Illustrations:	S.B. Tendle	
		Cover:	Khalap	
	21	*Chanakya*		508
		Script:	Yagya Sharma	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
	22	*Buddha*		510
		Script:	Prof. S.K. Ramachandra Rao	
		Illustrations:	Souren Roy	
		Cover:	P.D. Chopra	
	23	*Shivaji*		564
		Script:	B.R. Bhagwat	
		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	24	*Rana Pratap*		563
		Script:	Yagya Sharma	
		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	25	*Prithviraj Chauhan*		604
		Script:		
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:		
1972	26	*Karna*		531
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
	27	*Kacha*		661
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Souren Roy	
		Cover:		
	28	*Vikramaditya*		568
		Script:	Anand Prakash Singh	
		Illustrations:	H.S. Chavan	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	29	*Shiva Parvati*		506
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	

		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
	30	*Vasavadatta*		674
		Script:	Meena Talim	
		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:		
	31	*Sudama*		532
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Prabhakar Khanolkar	
		Cover:	L. Pednekar	
	32	*Guru Gobind Singh*		588
		Script:	Mala Dayal (nee Singh)	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Devender	
	33	*Harsha*		627
		Script:	Yagya Sharma and Anand Prakash Singh	
		Illustrations:	Madhu Powle	
		Cover:		
	34	*Bheeshma*		534
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	L.D. Pednekar	
		Cover:	L. Pednekar	
	35	*Abhimanyu*		533
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	36	*Mirabai*		535
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Yusuf Lien	
		Cover:	Yusuf Lien	
1973	37	*Ashoka*		536
		Script:	Meena Talim	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
	38	*Prahlad*		537
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Souren Roy	
		Cover:	P.D. Chopra	
	39	*Panchatantra: The Jackal and the War Drum*		540
		Script:	G.L. Chandiramani	
		Illustrations:	Jeffrey Fowler	
		Cover:	Jeffrey Fowler	
	40	*Tanaji*		682

		Script:	Meena Talim	
		Illustrations:	V.B. Halbe	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	41	*Chhatrasal*		
		Script:	Dr. H.K. Devsare	
		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	42	*Parashurama*		578
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Madhu Powle	
		Cover:	Madhu Powle	
	43	*Banda Bahadur*		734
		Script:	Khushwant Singh	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:		
	44	*Padmini*		605
		Script:	Yagya Sharma	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:		
	45	*Jataka Tales: Monkey Stories*		543
		Script:	Meena Talim	
		Illustrations:	Jeffrey Fowler	
		Cover:	Jeffrey Fowler	
	46	*Valmiki*		579
		Script:	Mali	
		Illustrations:	Prabhakar Khanolkar	
		Cover:		
	47	*Guru Nanak*		590
		Script:	G.S. Mansukhani and Naniki Mansukhani	
		Illustrations:	Devender	
		Cover:	Devender	
	48	*Tarabai*		
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
1974	49	*Ranjit Singh*		726
		Script:	Rahul Singh	
		Illustrations:	Devender	
		Cover:	Devender	
	50	*Ram Shastri*		698
		Script:	Kamla Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	V.B. Khalap	
		Cover:		

51	*Rani of Jhansi*		539
	Script:	Mala Singh	
	Illustrations:	Hema Joshi	
	Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
52	*Uloopi*		629
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	S.S. Havaldar	
	Cover:	Khalap	
53	*Baji Rao I*		
	Script:	B.R. Bhagwat	
	Illustrations:	V.B. Halbe	
	Cover:	Khalap	
54	*Chand Bibi*		685
	Script:	Toni Patel	
	Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
	Cover:		
55	*Kabir*		623
	Script:	Dolly Rizvi	
	Illustrations:	Umesh Burande	
	Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
56	*Sher Shah*		
	Script:		
	Illustrations:		
	Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
57	*Drona*		565
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	P.B. Kavadi	
	Cover:	P.B. Kavadi	
58	*Surya*		566
	Script:	Mayah Balse	
	Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
	Cover:		
59	*Urvashi*		612
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
	Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
60	*Adi Shankara*		656
	Script:	Padma Shri P. Narasimhayya	
	Illustrations:	Souren Roy	
	Cover:		
61	*Ghatotkacha*		592
	Script:	Lakshmi Seshadri	
	Illustrations:	Umesh Burande	

	Cover:		
62	*Tulsidas*		551
	Script:	Suresh Chandra Sharma	
	Illustrations:	V.B. Khalap	
	Cover:	V.B. Khalap	
63	*Sukanya*		
	Script:		
	Illustrations:		
	Cover:		
64	*Durgadas*		
	Script:		
	Illustrations:		
	Cover:		
65	*Aniruddha*		663
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
	Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
66	*Zarathushtra*		
	Script:	Bachi Karkaria	
	Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
	Cover:		
67	*The Lord of Lanka*		541
	Script:	Anant Pai	
	Illustrations:	Pulak Biswas	
	Cover:	Pulak Biswas	
68	*Tukaram*		
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	Prabhakar Khanolkar	
	Cover:	Prabhakar Khanolkar	
69	*Agastya*		
	Script:		
	Illustrations:		
	Cover:		
70	*Vasantasena*		657
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	G.R. Naik	
	Cover:	G.R. Naik	
71	*Indra and Shachi*		567
	Script:	Lakshmi Seshadri	
	Illustrations:	M.N. Nangare	
	Cover:	M.N. Nangare	
72	*Draupadi*		542
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	

		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
1975	73	*Subhadra*		
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:	Khalap	
	74	*Ahilyabai Holkar*		
		Script:	Meena Ranade	
		Illustrations:	P.B. Kavadi	
		Cover:	P.B. Kavadi	
	75	*Tansen*		552
		Script:	Dolly Rizvi	
		Illustrations:	Yusuf Lien	
		Cover:	Yusuf Lien	
	76	*Sundari*		
		Script:	Gurdial Singh Phul	
		Illustrations:	Devender	
		Cover:	Devender	
	77	*Subhas Chandra Bose*		544
		Script:	Yagya Sharma and Haridas Shetty	
		Illustrations:	Souren Roy	
		Cover:		
	78	*Shridatta*		
		Script:	Lakshmi Seshadri	
		Illustrations:	V.B. Halbe	
		Cover:	Khalap	
	79	*Jataka Tales: Deer Stories*		555
		Script:	Editorial Team	
		Illustrations:	Jeffrey Fowler	
		Cover:	Jeffrey Fowler	
	80	*Vishwamitra*		599
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:		
	81	*The Syamantaka Gem*		591
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	H.S. Chavan	
		Cover:	M.N. Nangare	
	82	*Mahavira*		594
		Script:	Rishabhdas Ranka	
		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	83	*Vikramaditya's Throne*		598

Script: Kamala Chandrakant
Illustrations: Nana Wagh
Cover:

84 *Bappa Rawal* 705
Script: Rajendra Sanjay
Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar
Cover: Ram Waeerkar

85 *Ayyappan* 673
Script: Shyamala Mahadevan
Illustrations: M. Mohandas
Cover:

86 *Ananda Math* 655
Script: Pradip Paul
Illustrations: Souren Roy
Cover:

87 *Birbal the Just* 559
Script: Anant Pai
Illustrations: A.S. Chitrak
Cover: A.S. Chitrak

88 *Ganga* 515
Script: Lakshmi Seshadri
Illustrations: S. Shaldar
Cover:

89 *Ganesha* 509
Script: Kamala Chandrakant
Illustrations: C.M. Vitankar
Cover:

90 *Chaitanya Mahaprabhu* 631
Script: Kamala Chandrakant
Illustrations: Souren Roy
Cover:

91 *Hitopadesha: Choice of Friends* 556
Script: Kamala Chandrakant
Illustrations: Jeffrey Fowler
Cover: Jeffrey Fowler

92 *Sakshi Gopal* 706
Script: Manoj Das
Illustrations: M.N. Nangare
Cover: M.N. Nangare

93 *Kannagi* 666
Script: Lalitha Raghupathi
Illustrations: Varnam
Cover: Varnam

	94	*Narsinh Mehta*		
		Script:	Vrajlal Vasani	
		Illustrations:	V.B. Halbe	
		Cover:	Khalap	
	95	*Jasma of the Odes*		
		Script:		
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:		
	96	*Sharan Kaur*		
		Script:	Maj (Smt.) B.K. Sohi	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
1976	97	*Chandrahasa*		697
		Script:	Subba Rao	
		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	98	*Pundalik and Sakhu*		
		Script:	Shobha Gangolli and Malati Deshpande	
		Illustrations:	Prabhakar Khanolkar	
		Cover:	Prabhakar Khanolkar	
	99	*Raj Singh*		
		Script:	Debrani Mitra	
		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	100	*Purushottam Dev and Padmavati*		
		Script:	Manoj Das	
		Illustrations:	Ravi Paranjape	
		Cover:	Ravi Paranjape	
	101	*Vali*		546
		Script:	Tyagaraj Sharma	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
	102	*Nagananda*		
		Script:		
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:		
	103	*Malavika*		569
		Script:	Kamlesh Pandey	
		Illustrations:	P.B. Kavadi	
		Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
	104	*Rani Durgavati*		606
		Script:		
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	

	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
105	*Dasharatha*		570
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	M.N. Nangare	
	Cover:		
106	*Rana Sanga*		630
	Script:	Rajendra Sanjay	
	Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
107	*Pradyumna*		
	Script:		
	Illustrations:		
	Cover:		
108	*Vidyasagar*		632
	Script:	Debashis Mukherji	
	Illustrations:	Souren Roy	
	Cover:	Khalap	
109	*Tachcholi Othenan*		
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	Mohan Das	
	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
110	*Sultana Razia*		725
	Script:		
	Illustrations:		
	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
111	*Sati and Shiva*		550
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	P.B. Kavadi	
	Cover:		
112	*Krishna and Rukmini*		516
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
	Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
113	*Raja Bhoja*		596
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	G.R. Naik	
	Cover:		
114	*Guru Tegh Bahadur*		694
	Script:	Ram Krishna Sudhakar	
	Illustrations:	Ranjana	
	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
115	*Pareekshit*		
	Script:	B.R. Bhagwat	

		Illustrations:	Prabhakar Khanolkar	
		Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
	116	*Kadambari*		
		Script:		
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:		
	117	*Dhruva and Ashtavakra*		571
		Script:	Shailaja Ganguly and Malati Shenoy	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	R.S. Umrotkar (deluxe ed.)	
			C.M. Vitankar (original)	
	118	*King Kusha*		664
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Souren Roy	
		Cover:		
	119	*Raja Raja Chola*		727
		Script:		
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:		
1977	120	*Dayananda*		624
		Script:	Onkar Nath Sharma	
		Illustrations:	H.S. Chavan	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	121	*Veer Dhaval*		
		Script:		
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:		
	122	*Ancestors of Rama*		572
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
	123	*Ekanath*		
		Script:	Subhas L. Desai	
		Illustrations:	V.B. Halbe	
		Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
	124	*Satwant Kaur*		
		Script:		
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:		
	125	*Udayana*		621
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	H.S. Chavan	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	

126	*Jataka Tales: Elephant Stories*		554
	Script:	Lakshmi Lal	
	Illustrations:	Ashok Dongre	
	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
127	*The Gita*		505
	Script:	Anant Pai	
	Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
	Cover:	P.G. Sircar	
128	*Veer Hammir*		692
	Script:	Rajendra Sanjay	
	Illustrations:	M.N. Nangare	
	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
129	*Malati and Madhava*		
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
	Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
130	*Garuda*		547
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	C.M. Vitankar	
	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
131	*Birbal the Wise*		545
	Script:	Anant Pai	
	Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
	Cover:		
132	*Ranak Devi*		
	Script:		
	Illustrations:		
	Cover:		
133	*Tales of Maryada Rama*		633
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	V.B. Halbe	
	Cover:		
134	*Babur*		
	Script:	Toni Patel	
	Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
135	*Devi Choudhurani*		659
	Script:	Debrani Mitra	
	Illustrations:	Souren Roy	
	Cover:		
136	*Rabindranath Tagore*		548
	Script:	Kalyanaksha Banerjee	
	Illustrations:	Souren Roy	

	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
137	*Soordas*		613
	Script:	Pushpa Bharati	
	Illustrations:	P.B. Kavadi	
	Cover:	Khalap	
138	*Panchatantra: The Brahman and the Goat*		562
	Script:	Shyamala Kutty	
	Illustrations:	Ashok Dongre	
	Cover:		
139	*Prince Hritadhwaja*		
	Script:		
	Illustrations:		
	Cover:		
140	*Humayun*		
	Script:		
	Illustrations:		
	Cover:		
141	*Prabhavati*		
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	H.S. Chavan	
	Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
142	*Chandra Shekhar Azad*		686
	Script:	Shail Tiwari	
	Illustrations:	H.S. Chavan	
	Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
143	*A Bag of Gold Coins*		607
	Script:	Devi Motichandra	
	Illustrations:	V.B. Halbe	
	Cover:	Ashok Dongre	
144	*Purandara Dasa*		
	Script:	V.A. Shenai	
	Illustrations:	M.N. Nangare	
	Cover:	M.N. Nangare	
145	*Bhanumati*		
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	H.S. Chavan and Ranjana	
	Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
146	*Vivekananda*		517
	Script:		
	Illustrations:	T. Kesava Rao and Souren Roy	
	Cover:		
147	*Krishna and Jarasandha*		518
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	

		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	148	*Noor Jahan*		701
		Script:	Laila Mahajan	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	P.G. Sircar	
	149	*Elephanta*		519
		Script:	Shakunthala Jagannathan	
		Illustrations:	C.M. Vitankar	
		Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
	150	*Tales of Narada*		520
		Script:	Onkar Nath Sharma	
		Illustrations:	P.B. Kavadi	
		Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
1978	151	*Krishnadeva Raya*		636
		Script:	Subba Rao	
		Illustrations:	G.R. Naik	
		Cover:		
	152	*Birbal the Witty*		557
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
	153	*Madhvacharya*		579
		Script:	Dr. B.N.K. Sharma	
		Illustrations:	H.S. Chavan	
		Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
	154	*Chandragupta Maurya*		634
		Script:	Subba Rao	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	P.G. Sircar	
	155	*Jnaneshwar*		723
		Script:	S.S. Apte	
		Illustrations:	H.S. Chavan	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	156	*Bagha Jatin*		724
		Script:	Shanta Patil and Subba Rao	
		Illustrations:	Souren Roy	
		Cover:		
	157	*Manonmani*		
		Script:	Lalitha Raghupathi	
		Illustrations:	Varnam	
		Cover:		
	158	*Angulimala*		521

Script: Subba Rao
Illustrations: Pratap Mulick
Cover:

159 *The Tiger and the Woodpecker* 622
Script: C.R. Sharma and Kamala Chandrakant
Illustrations: Ashok Dongre
Cover: Ashok Dongre

160 *Tales of Vishnu* 512
Script: Subba Rao
Illustrations: H.S. Chavan
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

161 *Amrapali* 635
Script: Subba Rao
Illustrations: H.S. Chavan and Ranjana.
Cover:

162 *Yayati* 637
Script: Subba Rao
Illustrations: Souren Roy
Cover:

163 *Panchatantra: How the Jackal Ate the Elephant* 560
Script: Kamala Chandrakant
Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar
Cover: Ram Waeerkar

164 *Tales of Shiva* 549
Script: Subba Rao
Illustrations: C.M. Vitankar
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

165 *King Shalivahana* 638
Script: Jagjit Uppal
Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar
Cover:

166 *The Rani of Kittur*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

167 *Krishna and Narakasura* 522
Script: Kamala Chandrakant
Illustrations: M.N. Nangare
Cover:

168 *The Magic Grove* 677
Script: Kamala Chandrakant
Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar
Cover:

169 *Lachit Barphukan* 684
Script: Dhrubananda Das and Subba Rao
Illustrations: Souren Roy
Cover: P.G. Sircar

170 *Indra and Vritra*
Script: Subba Rao
Illustrations: C.M. Vitankar
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

171 *Amar Singh Rathor* 681
Script: Kamlesh Pandey
Illustrations: Pratap Mulick
Cover: Pratap Mulick

172 *Krishna and the False Vasudeva* 639
Script: Kamala Chandrakant
Illustrations: V.B. Halbe
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

173 *Kochunni*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

174 *Tales of Yudhishthira* 703
Script: Subba Rao
Illustrations:
Cover:

175 *Hari Singh Nalwa*
Script: Jagjit Uppal
Illustrations: V.B. Halbe
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

176 *Tales of Durga* 514
Script: Subba Rao
Illustrations: Souren Roy
Cover:

177 *Krishna and Shishupala* 589
Script: Kamala Chandrakant
Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar
Cover:

178 *Raman of Tenali* 523
Script: Kamala Chandrakant
Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar
Cover: Ram Waeerkar

179 *Paurava and Alexander* 640
Script: Subba Rao
Illustrations: Souren Roy

		Cover:	P.G. Sircar	
	180	*Indra and Shibi*		524
		Script:		
		Illustrations:	H.S. Chavan and Dilip Kadam	
		Cover:		
	181	*Guru Har Gobind*		
		Script:		
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:		
1979	182	*The Battle for Srinagar*		
		Script:		
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:		
	183	*Rana Kumbha*		676
		Script:	Jagjit Uppal	
		Illustrations:	H.S. Chavan and Dilip Kadam	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	184	*Aruni and Uttanka*		652
		Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:		
	185	*Hitopadesha: How Friends are Parted*		620
		Script:		
		Illustrations:	Ashok Dongre	
		Cover:		
	186	*Tiruppan and Kanakadasa*		
		Script:		
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:		
	187	*Tipu Sultan*		
		Script:	Subba Rao	
		Illustrations:	G.R. Naik	
		Cover:	G.R. Naik	
	188	*Babasaheb Ambedkar*		611
		Script:	S.S. Rege	
		Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam	
		Cover:		
	189	*Thugsen*		
		Script:	Ramesh Mudholkar	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:		
	190	*Kannappa*		
		Script:		

Illustrations:
Cover:

191 *The King in a Parrot's Body*
Script:
Illustrations: Souren Roy
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

192 *Ranadhira*
Script: Subba Rao
Illustrations: Pradeep Sathe
Cover:

193 *Kapala Kundala* 720
Script: Debrani Mitra
Illustrations: Souren Roy
Cover: Pratap Mulick

194 *Gopal and the Cowherd* 641
Script: Gayatri Madan Dutt
Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar
Cover:

195 *Jataka Tales: Jackal Stories* 553
Script: Kamala Chandrakant
Illustrations: Chandrakant Rane
Cover:

196 *Hothal*
Script: Bharati Vyas
Illustrations: Dilip Kadam
Cover: Pratap Mulick

197 *The Rainbow Prince*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

198 *Tales of Arjuna* 525
Script: Lopamudra
Illustrations: C.M. Vitankar
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

199 *Chandralalat* 719
Script: Lopamudra
Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar
Cover: Pratap Mulick

200 *Akbar* 603
Script: Toni Patel
Illustrations: Souren Roy
Cover: P.G. Sircar

201 *Nachiketa and Other Stories* 702

		Script:	Subba Rao	
		Illustrations:	P.B. Kavadi	
		Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
	202	*Kalidasa*		600
		Script:	Yagya Sharma	
		Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	203	*Jayadratha*		653
		Script:		
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
	204	*Shah Jahan*		642
		Script:	Coomi B. Chinoy	
		Illustrations:	Souren Roy	
		Cover:	P.G. Sircar	
1980	205	*Ratnavali*		643
		Script:	Subba Rao	
		Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
		Cover:	Pratap Mulick	
	206	*Jayaprakash Narayan*		693
		Script:	Pushpa Bharati	
		Illustrations:	C.M. Vitankar	
		Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
	207	*Mahiravana*		526
		Script:	Meera Ugra	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
	208	*Jayadeva*		
		Script:		
		Illustrations:		
		Cover:		
	209	*Gandhari*		644
		Script:	Gayatri Madan Dutt	
		Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam	
		Cover:		
	210	*Birbal the Clever*		558
		Script:	Meera Ugra	
		Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
	211	*The Celestial Necklace*		711
		Script:	Toni Patel	
		Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam	
		Cover:		

212	*Basaveshwara*	718
	Script:	
	Illustrations:	
	Cover:	
213	*Velu Thampi*	
	Script:	
	Illustrations:	
	Cover:	
214	*Bheema and Hanuman*	527
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant
	Illustrations:	M.N. Nangare
	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar
215	*Panna and Hadi Rani*	687
	Script:	Meera Ugra and Dinanath Dube
	Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam
	Cover:	Pratap Mulick
216	*Rani Abbakka*	
	Script:	
	Illustrations:	
	Cover:	
217	*Sukhu and Dukhu*	
	Script:	Swapna Dutta
	Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam
	Cover:	P.G. Sircar
218	*Jataka Tales: The Magic Chant*	574
	Script:	Meera Ugra
	Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar
	Cover:	
219	*Lokamanya Tilak*	645
	Script:	Indu J. Tilak
	Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam
	Cover:	P.G. Sircar
220	*Kumbhakarna*	528
	Script:	Subba Rao and Nandini Das
	Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar
	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar
221	*Jahangir*	658
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant
	Illustrations:	Souren Roy
	Cover:	Pratap Mulick
222	*Samarth Ramdas*	
	Script:	S.S. Apte and Gayatri Madan Dutt
	Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam

		Cover: C.M. Vitankar	
	223	*Baladitya and Yashodharma*	717
		Script:	
		Illustrations:	
		Cover:	
	224	*Jataka Tales: Nandi Vishala*	619
		Script: Lopamudra	
		Illustrations: Ashok Dongre	
		Cover:	
	225	*Tales of Sai Baba*	601
		Script: Shobha Gangolli	
		Illustrations: C.M. Vitankar	
		Cover: R.S. Umrotkar	
	226	*Raman the Matchless Wit*	581
		Script: Subba Rao	
		Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	
	227	*Sadhu Vaswani*	
		Script:	
		Illustrations:	
		Cover:	
	228	*Birbal to the Rescue*	618
		Script: Meera Ugra	
		Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover:	
1981	229	*Shankar Dev*	
		Script:	
		Illustrations:	
		Cover: P.G. Sircar	
	230	*Hemu*	
		Script:	
		Illustrations:	
		Cover:	
	231	*Bahubali*	683
		Script: Subba Rao	
		Illustrations: Dilip Kadam	
		Cover:	
	232	*Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb*	
		Script: Coomi Chinoy	
		Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar	
		Cover: C.M. Vitankar	
	233	*Panchatantra: The Dullard and Other Stories*	585
		Script: Kamala Chandrakant	

Illustrations: Pradeep Sathe
Cover:

234 *Bhagat Singh* 608
Script: Rajinder Singh Raj and Subba Rao
Illustrations: Dilip Kadam
Cover: Pratap Mulick

235 *The Adventures of Agad Datta* 716
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

236 *Bahman Shah*
Script: Meera Ugra
Illustrations: Dilip Kadam
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

237 *Gopal the Jester* 584
Script: Urmila Sinha
Illustrations: Souren Roy
Cover:

238 *Friends and Foes: Animal Tales* 609
Script: Luis M. Fernandes
Illustrations: M. Mohandas
Cover:

239 *Hakka and Bukka*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

240 *Sahasramalla*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

241 *Balban*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

242 *Panchatantra: Crows and Owls* 561
Script: Luis M. Fernandes
Illustrations: M. Mohandas
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

243 *Ramanuja* 715
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

244 *The Pandavas in Hiding* 593

Script: Subba Rao
Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar
Cover: Ram Waeerkar

245 *Tyagaraja*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

246 *Jataka Tales: The Giant and the Dwarf* 575
Script: Subba Rao
Illustrations: Chandrakant D. Rane
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

247 *Jataka Tales: Tales of Wisdom* 586
Script: Luis M. Fernandes
Illustrations: Dilip Kadam
Cover:

248 *Bibhi Chand*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

249 *The Learned Pandit* 662
Script: Gayatri Madan Dutt
Illustrations: Anuradha Vaidya
Cover: Pratap Mulick

250 *Sambhaji*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

251 *The Adventures of Baddu and Chhotu* 651
Script: Luis M. Fernandes and Rupa Gupta
Illustrations: Souren Roy
Cover:

252 *Karttikeya* 529
Script: Pradip Bhattacharya and Meera Ugra
Illustrations: C.M. Vitankar
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

1982 253 *The Golden Mongoose* 670
Script: Luis M. Fernandes
Illustrations: Pratap Mulick
Cover: Pratap Mulick

254 *Hanuman to the Rescue* 513
Script: Luis M. Fernandes
Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar
Cover:

255 *Mystery of the Missing Gifts*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

256 *Sakhi Sarwar*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

257 *The Queen's Necklace* 714
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

258 *The Secret of the Talking Bird*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

259 *The Miraculous Conch and a Game of Chess*
Script: Luis M. Fernandes
Illustrations: Ram Waeerkar
Cover: Ram Waeerkar

260 *Sri Ramakrishna* 595
Script: Gayatri Madan Dutt
Illustrations: Souren Roy
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

261 *The Fool's Disciples* 713
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

262 *Rash Behari Bose* 721
Script: Satyavrata Ghosh and Luis M. Fernandes
Illustrations: Souren Roy
Cover: C.M. Vitankar

263 *The Prince and the Magician*
Script:
Illustrations:
Cover:

264 *The Hidden Treasure: A Jataka Tale* 617
Script: Meera Ugra
Illustrations: M.N. Nangare
Cover: G.R. Naik

265 *Echchama the Brave*
Script: Luis M. Fernandes and R.S. Ramarao
Illustrations: Dilip Kadam

	Cover:	Dilip Kadam	
266	*Manduka: The Lucky Astrologer*		
	Script:	Luis M. Fernandes	
	Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
	Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
267	*The Pandit and the Milkmaid and Other Tales*		646
	Script:	Gayatri Madan Dutt	
	Illustrations:	Pratap Mulick	
	Cover:		
268	*Tales of Shivaji*		597
	Script:	Subba Rao	
	Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam	
	Cover:	Dilip Kadam	
269	*Jataka Tales: The Mouse Merchant*		576
	Script:	Subba Rao	
	Illustrations:	Chandrakant D. Rane	
	Cover:	C.M. Vitankar	
270	*The Tiger-Eater*		707
	Script:	Subba Rao	
	Illustrations:	Ram Waeerkar	
	Cover:	Ram Waeerkar	
271	*Lal Bahadur Shastri*		647
	Script:	Vibha Ghai	
	Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam	
	Cover:		
272	*Andher Nagari*		
	Script:		
	Illustrations:		
	Cover:		
273	*The Churning of the Ocean*		538
	Script:	Toni Patel	
	Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam	
	Cover:	Dilip Kadam	
274	*Kesari the Flying Thief*		578
	Script:	Kamala Chandrakant	
	Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam	
	Cover:		
275	Subramania Bharati		708
	Script:	Kalvi Gopalakrisnan and Luis M. Fernandes	
	Illustrations:	Dilip Kadam	
	Cover:		
276	*Animal Tales from Arunachal Pradesh*		
	Script:		

		Illustrations:		
		Cover:		
1983	277	*Jataka Tales: Tales of Misers*		616
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	278	*Bimbisara*		688
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	287	*The Pious Cat and Other Tales*		

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1002 – Stories of Birbal
1003 – Stories from the Jatakas
1004 – Stories from the Panchatantra
1005 – Stories of Rama
1006 – Tales of Humour
1007 – More Stories from the Jatakas
1008 – Stories of Shiva
1009 – Stories of Vishnu
1010 – Heroes from the Mahabharata
1011 – Stories from Sanskrit Drama
1012 – Great Rulers of India
1013 – Brave Rajputs
1014 – Ancient Tales of Wit and Wisdom
1015 – Further Stories from the Jatakas
1016 – Stories from the Bhagawat
1017 – Stories of Buddha

1018 – Mahabharata
1019 – Great Freedom Fighters

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